# Thinking Beyond Modernism: Peripheral Realism and the Ethics of Truth-Telling

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## Dedication

To Cha

## Abstract

*Thinking Beyond Modernism: Peripheral Realism and the Ethics of Truth-Telling* explores how various forms of peripheral realism—an aesthetic that is hugely underappreciated not just in the Western academy but also in postcolonial studies—envision a new cultural analysis that allows us to understand and surpass the limits of modernism. First, I probe how modernist taste, with its ahistorical emphasis on aesthetic form and subjectivity, had far-reaching global influence at the expense of what it systematically jettisoned—that is, various realist attempts to reimagine the social value of literature. I analyze the demands of Western modernist aesthetics and its influence in the making of world literature and cinema to show how peripheral forms of art resist the modernist imperative. Second, I discuss recent instances in which realism re-appears as a problem—its status after the affective turn in literary cultural theory, its advent in the peripheral vision of the metropolitan writer J. M. Coetzee's Australian Trilogy, and its emergence as a peculiar from of "neo-realism" in literary and cinematic works from South America and South Korea—to demonstrate how authors reclaim an entirely new type of realism. De-emphasizing modernist delight in the wiles of language and skepticism about representations' correspondence to the real, neo-realists rediscover historical agents' ability to express their subjectivity in literary form without neglecting their own place in history. Finally, in addition to its broad geographical and political remit, the dissertation is, importantly, a study of genre. By investigating how peripheral neo-realists defend truthfulness and achieve a sober realism that understands the ethical

dimension of political life as essentially collective, I argue that realism's "fidelity to truth" is not merely an epistemological claim but an ethical attitude toward the world.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## I.1. World Literature Now and the Literary World System

On the 16th of May 2016, the South Korean author Han Kang's novel, *The Vegetarian* (2007), won the Man Booker International Prize, the first time a South Korean novel had ever done so. Soon after the news of this award, the novel which had only been read within small circles of the South Korean literati, suddenly became a national best-seller, and a flood of interviews with the author likewise followed. It did not take long, however, for the congratulatory mood of the Korean reading public to turn to general confusion, leading them to wonder: is there anything "Korean" about the novel except the ostensible fact that it was written by a Korean author about a Korean woman? The important inquiry reignited the long-held, uncomfortable debate on the national desire to be recognized by the West; the self-mocking Korean jokes, "Do you know Kimchi?" and "Do you know Ji-Sung Park?"—which used to be asked of foreigners from Europe and North America, in particular—evinced both how earnest South Koreans have been about promoting themselves to gain cultural visibility, and how exhausted they were with the struggle for recognition at the same time. While most think the jokes are now chiefly uttered with irony, to indicate a phase of Koreans' critical self-reflection—or even to humiliate themselves for their unrequited desire for acknowledgement—others are still hopeful that the inclusion of Han Kang's name on the best-seller list will heighten the culture's international status.

I am using this anecdote of Han Kang's recent achievement to question whether a paradoxically homogenizing tendency exists in world literature—namely whether a certain kind of already minted aesthetic dictates which works from Hong Kong, Somalia, and Argentina, for example, make it onto the front pages in the construction of world literature. Western recognition of the novel's modernist aesthetic led Koreans to "start" considering the form of the novel culturally important. But *The Vegetarian*'s modernism would appear to be the decisive factor in its western success: why award this novel and not Han Kang's novel on the Gwangju Massacre, *Human Acts* (2014), for instance, which appealed much more to the Korean reading public for its ostensibly political significance? It has even been disclosed recently that Han Kang was on a government mandated blacklist for writing about the massacre, and that President Park Geun-hye, who was recently impeached and arrested for her political scandals, had refused to congratulate her on the great success of winning the prestigious prize. Han Kang herself also makes clear many times that the novelistic style she employed in *The Vegetarian* had already become a thing of her past, implying that this work is not the kind of novel she considers ideal. The complicatedly woven but thematically consistent triptych structure of the novel and the attractive title, *The Vegetarian* (with its association of a minoritarian or bohemian lifestyle) are easily aligned with a general critique of gender and sexuality in South Korean society. The novel is an elegant combination of almost every modernist element, pleasantly reminding westerners of Frantz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1922), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and even Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). It is almost an unnecessary addition to say that Han

Kang, along with many other world-renowned Korean film directors such as Sang-soo Hong, Chan-wook Park, and Ki-duk Kim, was educated in one of the countries (the U.S., in particular) where she could gain so-called global consciousness. Aside from the possibility that the novel might perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes of the East's persistent patriarchy and of the oppressed status of Korean women in a not very original way—thus hinting at an incongruity between the country's economic development and its relative cultural backwardness—the West's tribute to this particular novel is an important symptom of the current literary world system. It demonstrates how those subaltern elements of literature in the (semi-)peripheral world picked up by the core keep functioning as evidence to affirm the core's aesthetic judgment.

This issue is not new at all, of course. It has been more than three decades since the unequal circulation of knowledge between the peripheral and the core economies has been discussed as a serious academic issue in studies of postcolonialism and comparative literature (though it was raised much earlier in communication studies and developmental economics). From Immanuel Wallerstein's famous world-systems theory in the 1970s to the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji's case study of western views of African thought,[1] a critique of how theoretical products made from Third World materials tend to structurally serve the interests of the First World has been a significant part of the academic endeavor. Nicholas Brown, in *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth Century Literature* (2005), for instance, spells out the so-called affinity between the process of cultural production and that of economic production:

[1] See his article "Recapturing" in *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987* (1992), as well as "Scientific Dependency in Africa Today" in *Research in African Literatures* 21.3 (1990): 5-15.

> In cultural as in directly economic production, the Third World tends to provide raw material (local knowledges, African novels, musical idioms) that are shipped to the research centers of the First World to be converted into finished products (anthropology and pharmaceuticals, literary criticism, Paul Simon albums) that are sometimes reimported to the periphery. (4)

Responsive to possible forms of new cultural imperialism, Fredric Jameson, in a similar but more specifically literary context, warned as early as 1986, in his seminal essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," against the potential pitfalls of studying Third World writers at the level of granting them a right to be recognized, "trying to prove that these texts are as 'great' as those of the canon itself" (65).

Accordingly, we have witnessed radical self-questioning in the particular field of world literature since the mid-1990s, as a rallying point of varied academic efforts, with a renewed interest in the world-system school of economic history and new perspectives on Goethean *Weltliteratur*. The popularity of the more recent concept of the Global South, in particular, has brought our attention to the relation between aesthetic form and place, as its discourse emphasizes, above all, the ongoing problem of unequal development and the significance of "networking among decolonial local histories" (Levander and Mignolo 10).[2] Although many such efforts have been made in the last decade to be mindful of the

[2] "The Global South" is a relatively recent concept that has slowly started to replace the term "Third World" in the post-Cold War era, according to Arif Dirlik, where "the 'Third World' is no longer viable concept geo-politically or as political project," but "may still provide an inspiration for similar projects presently that may render the Global South into a force in the reconfiguration of global relations" (Dirlik

literary contributions of parts of the world other than Europe and North America, debates on how to reinvent world literature with a global consciousness have kept the currently dominant selective criteria of the modernist aesthetic largely unchallenged. As Joe Cleary points out in "Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System" (2012) in a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly*, the imperative of an ethical sensitivity to voices from the periphery, as represented in the works of Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Rebecca Walkowitz, for example, often led to the claim that "Third World societies have their own indigenous modernisms (and postmodernisms)" (266).[3] In a similar context, Jed Esty and Collen Lye also show how the substitution of "alternative modernities and global modernisms" for postcoloniality during the 1990s, and the resultant legitimization of "the new modernist studies" (on the initiative of Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz) has been pursued at the level of merely replacing "a dualism of postmodernity and its subalterns" with "a dualism of modernity and its alternative versions," leading ultimately to "the expansion of the field of modernism" (273).[4] Modernism may have started with its own essentially radical aspiration to go beyond describing merely existing realities; in Adorno's words in *Aesthetic Theory,* modernist art attempted to "crystallize in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms" (226), by pursuing autonomous aesthetic production

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12). Less associated with specific geographical locations than a more general status of marginalization, the term highlights the agency of the periphery with its potential to "engage decolonial forces in art, knowledge, ethics, politics, and creative practice" (Levander and Mignolo 8). For a detailed discussion of the emergence of the concept and its promises, see Arif Dirlik's "Global South: Predicament and Promise," as well as "The Global South and World Dis/Order," co-written by Caroline Levander and Walter D. Mignolo.

[3] See Dilip Gaonkar's "On Alternative Modernities" in *Alternative Modernities* (2001) and Rebeca L. Walkowitz's *Cosmopolitan Style* (2006).

[4] See Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz's "Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New" in *Bad Modernisms* (2006).

containing a critical and subversive force in the otherwise standardized commodity structure of mass culture. But in the current situation, modernism ironically betrays this ambition. Indeed, one currently encounters a grim and sinister picture of the frustrated or even reversed Adornian project of autonomous art: modernism has become the dominant mode of literary critique, establishing for itself what Bourdieu calls "the monopoly of *the power of consecration* of producers and products" (224, original emphasis).

What we fail to see in this context is the curious resistance from the global periphery to modernist styles; this resistance, which we can call "neo-realism," is based on a cultural theory that explicitly posits a movement beyond modernism. That is, outside the major financial and media centers of Europe and North America, there is still an attraction, I suggest, to forms of literary and cinematic realism that have fallen out of favor within dominant modernist circles of metropolitan taste formation. Thus, what this dissertation calls for and intends to practice is a departure from the major attempts in modernist studies to discover in the periphery a modernism that has largely been exported there under the regimes of a colonial relationship. Since, with a particular focus on the liberating quality of the terms "alternative" or "divergent modernisms," such attempts to pluralize modernism unwittingly tend to re-posit the West as the only origin of modernity. The dissertation pays attention instead to the concept of peripheral realism in place of peripheral modernism in considering modernity's uneven and unequal effects under the current literary world-system. My use of the terms, "core," and "periphery" is not to acknowledge the starkness of the contrast as Franco Moretti sometimes does. As the Warwick Research Collective rightly points out in *Combined and Uneven*

*Development*, some metropolitan writers "inhabit a 'core' relative to a 'periphery' within the (semi-) peripheral areas" (55), and writers from core countries are sometimes from the peripheries within the core due to their marginalized class, racial, and/or gender positions as well.[5] But then, the terms can be still used in a useful way, as its opposition evokes the present problem of uneven development in peripheral nations.[6] It registers an inevitable recognition that modernity, to which Adorno thinks modernism says no, cannot be fully investigated without thinking of its association with imperialist global capitalism. To delve into heterogeneous aesthetic forms corresponding to the structural and historical unevenness of the periphery, paying attention to formal specificities resulting from their social relationships, in this regard, can possibly have an advantage for revealing the existence of structural contradictions within an imperialist world-system, challenging the idea of global capitalism's universality.

It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that I deny any existence of what Neil Lazarus calls in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), "*a modernist writing after the canonization of modernism*" that "refuses integration, resolution, consolation, comfort; protests and criticizes" (31, original emphasis). Modernism, however defined, emerged brilliantly, participating in the dissolution of the old Paris-centered literary world system and proclaiming radical roles for literature in a new world system.

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[5] The Warwick Research Collective is composed of a variety of specialists whose shared inquires include what constitutes contemporary global literary studies, and among others, how to rethink world literature as a "system structured on inequality (rather than cultural difference)" (7). The collective includes Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro.

[6] Studying Russian conditions in the 1930s, Trotsky observed that in the "backward" zones of the world system the imperialist powers had introduced the capitalist social relations while at the same time maintaining their archaic forms of economic life. The outcome was, in his words, "a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" (27), which he proposed as a theory of uneven and combined development.

Modernist artists promoted the purity of art as a sacred realm above commerce (as in Eliot and Yeats) or took the revolutionary doctrines of art as the liberating vanguard of popular consciousness (as in Picasso and Brecht). As Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson famously argue, however, the war of 1939-45 brought an end to many of the anti-capitalist movements and transformed most of the earlier positions; since the post-war settlement and its accompanying, complicit academic endorsement in the U.S., modernism began to be canonized and comfortably integrated into the new international capitalism. For instance, its characteristic image of a contemplative loner in a crowd of strangers, which once captured the ambiguities of modern city life with its existential isolation as a simultaneous form of liberation, has become widely commercialized, and alienation itself has become romantically enshrined.

What we notice now is modernism's stable settlement or fixation in the present; in Williams's words, "modernism is *here* in this specific phase or period" (34, original emphasis), and there is nothing beyond it. "In an act of pure ideology," Williams argues, "it stops history dead. Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of development. It is *after*, stuck in the post" (34-35, original emphasis). My project resists this exhaustion. It questions how modernism's institutionalization in U.S. academia has marginalized realism, with the aim of reclaiming realism's inevitability in explaining our changed social reality. Although the tendency that Esty and Lye call "a new realist turn" (277) may not be prominent yet, it seems that the necessity to represent realities and to remap the world system—beyond treating reality as a negative or impossible object of representation—is growing more significant with the expansion of

global capitalism. Though pushed to the margin, forms of peripheral realism, I argue, reveal that realism has not become exhausted but remains, even at the very moment of literature's impossibility, as a possible alternative for reimagining the social value of literature.

By exploring the emergence of neo-realists after modernism in the global periphery, this dissertation investigates how the periphery demands mutuality between itself and the core in the global articulations of modern life as a constructive frame of world literature. My argument is that this mutuality can only be achieved on the premise of our shared understanding of modernity as a singular modernity, in Fredric Jameson's phrase—that is, a world of difference unified by an essentially capitalist form. The return of realism in the margins of the world system is paradigmatic not only of the periphery's untiring participation in the critique of homogenizing capitalism, but also its intervention in the task of reimagining the potential of the literary mode. Furthermore, the persistent replication of the aesthetic choices of an older realism in the periphery allows us to rethink realism not as a dead end on the way to modernism, but as a sort of ethical program after the hegemony of modernist aesthetics. In the face of modernism's canonization and postmodernism's conformist tendency as the cultural logic of capitalism, the periphery has chosen to reinvent the already familiar, whose political, aesthetic, and ethical potential, however, has not been exhausted. Keenly aware of the historical continuity of modernist forms and themes in realism, peripheral neo-realists transform the tension between realism and modernism into a productive force for a new ethical community. And it fundamentally evinces the strengthened desire of the people of

the periphery to "understand" the world beyond its unknowability. Such understanding is a basic condition for the possibility of change.

## I.2. Revisiting the Realism-Modernism Debate

The sophistications of peripheral neo-realism are built, in fact, on a critique of modernist representation, and understanding the re-emergence of realism in the global periphery requires us to revisit the classic conflict between realism and modernism. Despite the diversification of theoretical perspectives since the formation of postwar critical theory, realism and modernism have continued to represent distinctive but inevitably interrelated modes of philosophical and political attitudes for investigating the relation between aesthetics and politics. Fredric Jameson, for instance, points out the continued relevance of the classical debate in the afterword to *Aesthetics and Politics*:

> Nowhere has this [Freudian] 'return of the repressed' been more dramatic than in the aesthetic conflict between 'Realism' and 'Modernism,' whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today. . . . The dispute is itself older than Marxism, and in a longer perspective may be said to be a contemporary political replay of the seventeenth-century *Querelle des anciens et des moderns*, in which, for the first time, aesthetics came face to face with the dilemmas of historicity. ("Conclusion" 217)

As is well-known, Marxist thinkers—Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, and Jameson, among others—discussed realism and modernism, characteristically, in terms of the

dialectical relation between form and content. Even though they agreed on the basic idea that there is a fundamentally inseparable relationship between literature and the complexes and contradictions of society, their delineations of the artistic presentation of social contradictions were disparate, resulting in their different understandings of what it means to be "real."

## Georg Lukács and the Dialectic of Form and Content

Lukács's realism, first of all, comes to light in its stark antagonism to modernism, which he relentlessly denounced as reactionary. He considered the modernist representation of reality, with its foregrounding of style and technique, as a fundamentally static approach to the world. That is, Lukács's criticism of modernism, whose boundaries he extended from naturalism all the way to surrealism, is enacted not just an aesthetic one; the distinction between realism and modernism, for Lukács, is always the question of a politico-philosophical attitude toward reality. What is at issue is not primarily a question of style and formal technique but rather the hidden contrasting principles that underlie and determine the opposing styles of realism and modernism. To make this point clear, in "The Ideology of Modernism," Lukács contrasts the disparate uses of the same stylistic technique of the interior monologue in James Joyce's *Ulysses*—Bloom's monologue in the lavatory or Molly's monologue in bed, in particular—and Goethe's early-morning monologue as conceived by Thomas Mann's *Lotte in Weimar* (17). Lukács's argument is that, in Joyce, technique is elevated to the status of "something absolute" (18), since it is not just a stylistic device but the formative principle governing the whole construction of the story, from the presentation of character to the

narrative pattern. In Thomas Mann, however, the interior monologue is simply a technical device, "allowing the author to explore aspects of Goethe's world which would not have been otherwise available" (18).

> Goethe's experience is not presented as confined to momentary sense-impressions. The artist reaches down to the core of Goethe's personality, to the complexity of his relations with his own past, present, and even future experience. The stream of association is only apparently free. The monologue is composed with the utmost artistic rigour: it is a carefully plotted sequence gradually piercing to the core of Goethe's personality. Every person or event, emerging momentarily from the stream and vanishing again, is given a specific weight, a definite position, in the pattern of the whole. (18)

The dissimilar status of the same stylistic technique in Joyce and Mann leads Lukács to argue that modernism fails to penetrate what can be called "the inherent dialectic" of formal problems. With the "perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory-data, their powerfully charged, but aimless and directionless, fields of force" (18), the non-dialectical view of form and intention—the intention realized in the work by a writer, which does not always coincide with the writer's conscious intention, he emphasizes—ultimately ends up constructing a "static" structure, reflecting its inert and sensational view of the world.

An exclusive emphasis on formal matters when considering modernism is derived from a misconceived relation between form and content, the problem of which, for

Lukács, transcends their merely aesthetic reference and is connected to the question of the social itself; what concerns him is the *weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work, which constitutes the writer's intention and is the formative principle of the work itself. Looked at in this way, Lukács argues, "style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content" (19).[7] In another essay, "Remarks Toward a Theory of Literature," he makes a similar remark on aesthetic form: "every form is an evaluation of life, a pronouncement of judgment over life; it gains the power to do so from the fact that in its deepest aspect, it is already a *Weltanschauung*" (qtd. in Gluck 870). The ultimate identity of form and content through their dialectical movement of contradiction implied in this essay explains Lukács's hostility toward modernism's exclusive concentration on form as a solely aesthetic category, leading to the serious misunderstanding of the character of an artist's work.

The isolation of form from content robs the most rigorous modernists of a sense of perspective. The whole course and content of a story should be governed by perspective, but Lukács notices, in the works of Kafka, Benn, and Musil, the common lack of a perspective that can determine the direction in which characters develop and how the threads of the narration will be drawn together ("Modernism" 33). By dropping this selective principle, or "replacing it with its dogma of the *condition humaine*" (34),

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[7] Lukács's understanding of aesthetic form is derived from Hegel's dialectical conception of the relation between form and content. For Hegel, the content of art is the Idea, whose form is the artistic configuration of sensuous material, and the vocation of art is to "harmonize these two sides and bring them into a free reconciled totality" (*Aesthetics* 70). Though derived from the Platonic "idea," Hegel's Idea is different from Plato's in that it is a "combination of concept with reality" (*Aesthetics* ix). In *Phenomenology of Spirit* as well, Hegel emphasizes the inevitable relation that form has with content, implying their ultimate identity: "It is for this reason unnecessary to clothe the content in an external [logical] formalism; the content is in its very nature the transition into such formalism, but a formalism which ceases to be external, since the form is the innate development of the concrete content itself" (*Phenomenology* 34-35).

however, Lukács argues that modernism ends up taking the principle of "naturalistic arbitrariness": "We encounter it in the all-determining 'social conditions' of naturalism, in Symbolism's impressionist methods and its cultivation of the exotic, in the fragmentation of objective reality in Futurism and Constructivism and the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or again, Surrealism's stream of consciousness" (33). The distinction between realism and naturalism relies on the existence or absence of a "hierarchy of significance" in the situations and characters; modernists' inability to grasp this difference leads to the "basically naturalistic character of modernist literature" (34).

The static apprehension of reality coupled with the lack of perspective in modernist literature, for Lukács, is already rooted in the ideology of modernism, which has an inner connection with a certain tradition of bourgeois thought. What Lukács notices in modernist literature is the embodiment of the Kierkegaardian view of the world that gained remarkable popularity after the Second World War: "the individual exists within an opaque, impenetrable 'incognito'" (27). The Hegelian dialectical unity is no longer posited between inner and outer world, and now "a man's external deeds are no guide to his motives" (27).[8] This philosophical doctrine, with its axiom of man's inevitable isolation from his world, is represented in modernist literature through the repetitive emphasis on the role of psychopathology, which is, for Lukács, nothing other than an attempt to escape from the dreariness of life under capitalism into neurosis, as well as the obsession with morbidity, and, ultimately, meaninglessness, nothingness, and impotence—all of which imply that outer reality is not alterable. Beckett's *Molloy* best

[8] Lukács explains how Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Gottfried Benn, and others passionately embraced this doctrine of the eternal incognito, and delineates the social implications of such ontology by relating the doctrine to their participation in Nazism (27).

exemplifies the modern fascination with what Lukács calls "morbid eccentricity" by presenting us with "an image of the most human degradation—an idiot's vegetative existence" (31).

Again, the perverse prevalence of idiocy and eccentricity as the *condition humaine* in modernist literature is not just a literary problem for Lukács; it is associated with an ideological problem, derived from the ontological dogma of the solitariness of man with which modern philosophy is imbued—here, Lukács is thinking about Heidegger's "*das Man*," Klages' incompatibility of *Geist*, or Rosenberg's racial mythology (32). "A glorification of the abnormal and an undisguised anti-humanism" (32) is Lukács's ultimate evaluation of modernist literature. One consequence of the influence of modern philosophy, what he names subjective idealism, is the accentuation of subjective time in modernism, an abstractly conceived time, "separated from historical change and particularity of place" (37). Through a comparison with the different intention of realists' dealing with time, Lukács reveals the essentially reactionary character of subjectivism, which is deeply rooted in the experience of modernists.

> The major realists of our time deliberately introduce elements of disintegration into their work—for instance, the subjectivizing of time—and use them to portray the contemporary world more exactly. . . . But in modernist literature, the disintegration of the world of man—and consequently the disintegration of personality—coincides with the ideological intention. Thus *angst*, this basic modern experience, this by-product of *Geworfenheit*, has its emotional origin in the experience of a

> disintegrating society. But it attains its effects by evoking the disintegration of the world of man. (39-40)

The isolation of time from the outer world of reality causes the inner world of the subject to be transformed into "a sinister, inexplicable flux" (39), endowing it with a static character.

Man's alienation from his reality is best described by the use of the aesthetic genre of allegory in modernism, Lukács points out. What is problematic about allegory, for him, lies not just in its rejection of an immanent meaning of human existence—drawing on Benjamin's examination of allegory, Lukács explains why transcendence, the essence of allegory, is doomed to destroy aesthetics itself (40-41)—but in its association with the annihilation of history. If the notion of objective time is essential to the understanding of history, as Benjamin and Lukács alike thought, modernism, because it does not hold any concept of the coherence and rationality of the world or any belief in man's ability to penetrate them, cannot reach the proper consciousness of history. The logical result of the negation of history is a pervasively episodic and immediate representation of the world. Reality in modernist literature has a spectral character, with a hero who is confined within the limits of his own experience, or who is without personal history—he is just thrown-into-the-world. Lukács finds the culmination of this development in Kafka, whose aim is to "raise the individual detail in its immediate particularity to the level of abstraction" (45), which is typical of modernism's allegorical approach. "This allegorical transcendence," he asserts, "bars Kafka's way to realism" (45).

For Lukács, modernist writers' confinement to the representation of immediate experience and their inability to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence are essentially due to their failure to understand the correct dialectical unity of appearance and essence—after all, how to envision the relation between appearance and essence is the crux of Lukács's realism: "The richer, the more diverse, complex and 'cunning' this dialectic [of appearance and essence] is, the more firmly it grasps hold of the living contradiction of life and society, then the greater and the more profound the realism will be" ("Realism" 36). Thus, what he said about Ernst Bloch's celebration of expressionism in "Realism in the Balance" should be also thought of as a criticism directed at modernism: "Bloch's mistake lies in the fact that he identifies this state of mind directly and unreservedly with reality itself. He equates the highly distorted image created in this state of mind with the thing itself, instead of objectively unraveling the essence, the origins and the mediations of the distortion by comparing it with reality" (30). That is, frozen in its own immediacy, modernist literature fails to transcend the limits of such immediacy to probe more deeply the real world. Hegel has already taught us of the link between immediacy and abstraction, and here, Lukács is also thinking of Marx's argument that the entire process of capitalist production "involves the obliteration of all mediations and so represents the most extreme form of abstraction" (36). Lukács admits that there can be no art without abstraction, but even so, abstraction must have a direction on which everything relies. Lacking this sense of direction, or *perspective*, modernist literature cannot get to the core of reality, which is possible only if the question of totality is properly formulated in search of the relation between literature and life.

With the consciousness of history as the living dialectical unity between continuity and discontinuity, realism in Lukács faces the people's future, imagined through the mediation of the great literary traditions of past and present, for the creation of what he calls "life-creating, popular progressiveness"—"a struggle for a genuine popular culture, a manifold relationship to every aspect of the life of one's own people as it has developed in its own individual way in the course of history" ("Realism" 57). True realist literature, therefore, beyond the immediately obvious aspect of reality, delves into forces that have not yet fully blossomed beneath the surface, and makes potentiality concrete by discerning and giving shape to it. If this is the great historical mission of the true literary avant-garde, Lukács concludes, "only the major realists are capable of forming a genuine avant-garde" (46).

## Theodor Adorno and the Autonomy of Art

If Lukács's dialectic of form and intention in works of art faithfully accentuates Hegelian content-aesthetics [*Inhaltsästhetik*], Adorno, while accepting the Hegelian understanding of form as "the innate development of the concrete content itself" (*Phenomenology* 35),[9] tries to elevate form as the condition of possibility for any dialectic between the aesthetic and the empirical itself. For Adorno, one of Hegel's mistakes in *Aesthetics* lies in his misconception of form as content, which causes his idealist dialectic to end up regressing to "a crude, pre-aesthetic level": "It confuses the representational or discursive treatment of thematic material with the otherness that is

[9] "If art opposes the empirical through the element of form—and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation—the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content" (*Aesthetic Theory* 5).

constitutive of art. Hegel transgresses against his own dialectical conception of aesthetics, with consequences he did not foresee; he in effect helped transform art into an ideology of domination" (*Aesthetic Theory* 7). The unique status of art in Adorno is derived from the enigmatic and paradoxical character of form, which is itself what makes the very concept of the "autonomy" of art possible.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues very clearly that art can only be understood by its laws of movement, and that it should be defined by its relation to what it is not; art "acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of" (3), and this element of otherness is essential to his "materialistic-dialectical aesthetics" (3). What makes his aesthetics distinguishable from those of other dialectical thinkers, however, is his exclusive emphasis on the role of form in the dialectical movement of art. For Adorno, form itself is the precondition of the dialectic between art and society, as the fundamental factor constitutive of the autonomy of art that enables art to resist the status quo of society.

> Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber. Yet art is not to be dismissed simply by its abstract negation. By attacking what seemed to be its foundation throughout the whole of its tradition, art has been qualitatively transformed; it itself becomes qualitatively other. It can do this because through the ages by means of its form, art has turned against the status quo and what merely exists just as much as it has come to its aid

> by giving form to its elements. Art can no more be reduced to the general formula of consolation than to its opposite. (2)

As is implied in his famous aphorism, "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime" (111) in *Minima Moralia*—and as he makes clear in the chapter on "Society" in *Aesthetic Theory*—Adorno considers the virtue of art as its ability to break through reified consciousness in the industrial or totally administered society, and he discovers the momentum of this resistance in the "autonomy" of art. The concept of autonomy embodies Adorno's unique and complex understanding of the relation of the artwork to the world. Although Adorno thinks that the antagonisms of society are preserved in art and the truth content of artworks is historical ("as the materialization of the most progressive consciousness, . . . the truth content of artworks is the unconscious writing of history bound up with what has until now been repeatedly vanquished" [*Aesthetic Theory* 191-192]), he tries to avoid the perils of historicism by emphasizing the immanent relation of history to artworks. Art is not externally related to history, which complicates the relation between art and the social:

> Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it criticizes

> society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. (226)

Art, for Adorno, is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world, and by its difference from empirical reality the artwork can constitute itself in relation to what is not. Art's rejection of the empirical world is not a mere escape, but a law immanent to the concept of art itself, and in this way "art sanctions the primacy of reality" (*Aesthetic Theory* 2).

Adorno's emphasis on art's autonomy from the empirical world explains the reason why he fiercely opposed Sartre's endorsement of politically committed works of art. For him, the fundamental distance that art maintains from empirical reality is already partly mediated by that reality ("the imagination of the artist is not a creation ex nihilo; only dilettanti and aesthetes believe it to be so" ["Commitment" 211]), and bad politics inevitably ends up being bad art. The example that he gives here is Brecht's work, *The Measures Taken*, whose political intentions are impossible to separate from its beauties. What is problematic about the notion of a message in art, for Adorno, is that it already contains an accommodation to the world, easily falling prey to popularization and adaptation to the market, and this is the basis of his criticism of what he thinks Lukács defended, a so-called "normal artwork" (*Aesthetic Theory* 188). For art tolerates no correspondence to a norm or any establishment of the meaning of a norm, but negates the "spurious universal of the norm" (188) by being distanced from it. Hence his paradoxical conclusion: "Art, which even in its opposition to society remains a part of it, must close

its eyes and ears against it—it cannot escape the shadow of irrationality" ("Commitment" 215).

While committed works all too readily lose the power of resistance by "easily crediting themselves with every noble value and manipulating them at their ease" ("Commitment" 215), autonomous works of art, whose governing principle is their own inherent formal structure, become more than just ideology, and they keep themselves alive through their form's social force of resistance; Kafka and Beckett, the great modernist writers whose works Adorno thinks best exemplify the principle of autonomous art, "*compel* the change of attitude which committed works merely *demand*" (212, emphasis added). By separating themselves from their other, i.e., the empirical world, autonomous works of art witness that the world itself should be other than it is, and it is in this sense that Adorno calls them "the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation" (*Aesthetic Theory* 177).

In fact, autonomous art's power of resistance, which Adorno embraces, is not unrelated to his conception of artworks as "things." In any given work of literature, for example, Adorno thinks the role of the writer in the production of his work is minimal; his act is reduced to that of "mediating between the problem that confronts him" and the "solution, which is itself similarly lodged in the material as potential" (166). Naturally, the creator is not the subject of the work—the subject of art is "spirit bound up with, preformed and mediated by the object" (166)—and he is not who speaks in the work either. Neither is the audience or receiver of the work. Rather, who speaks in the work of art is the latent I, "who is immanently constituted in the work through the action of the

work's language" (167). The collective essence of the latent I, Adorno explains, externalizes the private I, and it constitutes the linguistic quality of works; the collective is formed more intimately as it turns against linguistically reified expression; "Art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation; this is a possibility only for its non-discursive language. Only in this process is its We concretized" (168). [10] For Adorno, great modernist literature achieved this aim of art through "the negation of meaningful reality" ("*Endgame*" 130) and the art of meaninglessness as the only meaning.[11]

Artworks as "things" in Adorno, however, have a paradoxical mission to negate their own status as things, and thus, to turn against art itself, since "the totally objectivated artwork would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectivation it would regress to an impotently powerless subjective impulse and flounder in the empirical world" (*Aesthetic Theory* 175). The same logic constitutes the aporia of art: artworks should insist "fetishistically" on their coherence "as if they were the absolute that they are unable to be" (228), but their survival becomes precarious as soon as art becomes conscious of its fetishism. That is, art keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance against a mass cultural situation in which nothing can escape the danger of the communicational; in Adorno's own words, "unless it reifies itself, it becomes a commodity" (226). In Adorno's aesthetic theory, therefore, art cannot help

[10] Like art itself, the knowledge of art should be dialectical as well, Adorno argues: "The more the observer adds to the process, the greater the energy with which he penetrates the artwork, the more he then becomes aware of objectivity from within. He takes part in objectivity when his energy, even that of his misguided subjective "projection," extinguishes itself in the artwork. The subjective detour may totally miss the mark, but without the detour no objectivity becomes evident" (*Aesthetic Theory* 175).

[11] For Adorno's analysis of Beckettian absurdity as the supreme example of the immanent dialectic of form, see his essay "Trying to Understand *Endgame*" in *The Adorno Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000).

assuming a new form of reification in which the work resists the commodity reification, in Fredric Jameson's words, "in order to homeopathically to undermine commodity reification itself" (*Modernist Papers* 182). This "perverse formulation" (182) of Adorno's serves as a starting point for Jameson's own dialectic of form and content.

## Fredric Jameson and an Aesthetics of Failure

Jameson's evaluation of Adorno's valorization of high modernism—as autonomous aesthetic production containing critical and subversive force in the commodity structure of mass culture—is ambiguous. On the one hand, he shares Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the commodity structure has been introduced into the very form and content of the work of art itself[12]—Jameson considers their analysis as the extension and application of Marxist theories of commodity reification to the works of mass culture ("Reification" 130). Everything in consumer society has now taken on an aesthetic dimension, as is expressed in Guy Debord's assertion of the ultimate form of commodity reification in the universal commodification of our objective world in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images" (33). On the other hand, what is unsatisfactory about Adorno's stance for Jameson, who is seeking the possibility of a reconciliation between modernism and mass culture, lies in its valorization of modernism as a new "solution": "The conception of the modernist text as the production and the protest of an isolated individual, and the logic of its sign systems as so many private

[12] Jameson here tries to measure Adorno and Horkheimer's application of the notion of reification to works of art against the Kantian definition of art as a "finality without an end," that is, as a "goal oriented activity which nonetheless has no practical purpose or end in the 'real world' of business or politics or concrete human praxis" ("Reification" 131).

languages ('styles') and private religions are contradictory and make the social or collective realization of its aesthetic project an impossible one" ("Reification" 135). What Jameson worries about is the possibility that the great works of high modernism will serve as a fixed standard against which the "degraded" status of mass culture might be measured (133), which leads Jameson to insist, instead, on the necessity of viewing modernism as a symptom, as a "result of cultural crisis" (135), rather than as a new solution.

Jameson's attempt to examine the dialectical relation and structural interrelatedness between modernism and mass culture[13] fundamentally opens up the question of the dilemma of form and content. In a way, he endorses the view that only modernism is capable of resisting the omnipresence of the commodity form, because its formal vocation is not to be a commodity and moreover to create an aesthetic language not subject to commodity satisfaction and instrumentalization. The way modernist writers achieved this vocation was by trying to transform content into pure form, and for this quest for the "Absolute," namely, the "ultimate mirage of the identity of form and content" (*Modernist Papers* xix), Jameson idiosyncratically calls a "Utopian impulse." In mass culture as well, Jameson discovers a similar Utopian longing for the authentic cultural creation that capitalism systematically dissolves, yet processed in a very different

[13] What Jameson means by mass culture needs to be distinguished from so-called popular culture, which he thinks does not exist any longer. If the popular "reflected and were dependent for their production on quite different social realities, were in fact the 'organic' expression of so many distinct social communities or castes, such as the peasant, village, the court, the medieval town, the polis, and even the classical bourgeoisie when it was still a unified social group with its own cultural specificity" (134), mass culture represents the agglomeration of atomized and fragmented individuals by late capitalism's universal commodification, which has nothing in common with older forms of popular art. This constitutes, for Jameson, the reason why the relation between modernism and mass culture needs to be newly understood as an object of cultural study in a whole new field.

form. That is, modernism and mass culture should be considered as a single historical and aesthetic phenomenon, from which the two different modes were dissociated by the ruse of capitalism "to dissolve the fabric of all cohesive social groups without exception" ("Reification" 140).

> Both mass culture and modernism have as much content, in the loose sense of the word, as the older social realisms; but that this content is processed in a very different way than in the latter. Both modernism and mass culture entertain relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material; only where modernism tends to handle this material by producing compensatory structures of various kinds, mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony. ("Reification" 141)

The reading of high modernism and mass culture as historically and dialectically interdependent phenomena requires Jameson to fundamentally reconsider the binary opposition between form and content, not in order to do away with the opposition, but to multiply it, which is what he believes to be the true method for undoing binary oppositions (*Modernist Papers* xiii). The consequence is his suggestion of a four-term set of positions, borrowed from Hjelmslev's linguistics, rather than a simple dualism of form and content (*Modernist Papers* xiv).

form content

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| CONTENT | form of content | content of content |
| FORM | form of form | content of form |

By adding the new entities, the "content of the form" and the "form of the content," to the form-oriented perspective ("the form of the form") and the content-oriented perspective ("the content of the content"), Jameson tries to challenge the traditional binary opposition of form and content—for example, a stereotypical socialist realism on the one hand and a linguistic formalism on the other. What is generally designated as a "context" is no less figural, no less a "form," for Jameson, and the focus of formalism on the purer version of form necessarily fails as well since "we cannot escape our being-in-the world, even by way of its formalizing negations" (*Modernist Papers* xvii). Yet the attempt to escape the world's ideologies deserves to be valued as a Utopian longing for the identity of form and content—Jameson, however, never forgets to add that Utopia is also the name for the failure of their identification with each other—and the "pure forms still bear the traces and the marks of the content they sought to extinguish" (*Modernist Papers* xvii). This perspective foregrounds Jameson's understanding of literary modernism, which he defines as the historical moment in which "the ideological forms of an older content are somehow neutralized and bracketed by an abstraction that seeks to retain only from them their purely formal structures, now deployed in a kind of autonomy" (*Modernist Papers* xviii).

Jameson's adoption of the new entities of the "form of the content" in the "limits of a specific historical situation and its contradictions" and the "content of the form," or "the possibilities for figuration of representation" (*Modernist Papers* xix), in approaching

literary modernism can thus be read as representing his attempt to correct the most commonly held stereotypes about modernism: namely, the apolitical characters of modernism and its increased subjectification and introspective psychologization. It is misleading for Jameson to characterize modernism as some inward turn away from the social materials of realism, since there is nothing private or personal in it, and even the so-called purest linguistic style is intricately enmeshed with the extraliterary elements of modern politics and economics. His example, here, is James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In *Ulysses*, there is something like the "coincidence of the social and the aesthetic" (*Modernist Papers* 163) due to the singularity of the geographical background of the novel, Dublin. Dublin in *Ulysses* indicates a "national situation which reproduces the appearance of First World social reality and social relationships—perhaps through the coincidence of its language with the imperial language—but whose underlying structure is in fact much closer to that of the Third World or of colonized daily life" (164). On the one hand, Joyce secures the modernist autonomy of language by way of the consistent refusal of expression and human communication, with the blockage of communication producing the "illusion of a language that speaks all by itself, without the intervention of human agency" (191), as is shown in the impersonal sentence combinations in the "Cyclops" chapter of *Ulysses*: "Love loves to love love. Nurse loves the new chemist / Constable 14A loves Mary Kelly. Getty Macdowell loves the boy that has the bicycle. M.B. loves a fair gentlemen. Li Chi Han lovey up kissy Cha Pu Chow / Jumbo, the elephant, loves Alice, the elephant. Etc" (qtd. in Jameson, *Modernist Papers* 191). On the other hand, locating the whole story in the peculiar space of Dublin, the colonized marginal space of

the imperial system, makes the "essential linguisticality of *Ulysses*"[14] itself a result of imperialism, which "condemns Ireland to an older rhetorical past and to the survivals of oratory (in the absence of action), and which freezes Dublin into an underdeveloped village in which gossip and rumor still reign supreme" (166); stories and gossip are pervasive in the world of *Ulysses*. The deeper reality of the colonial situation of Ireland itself makes it unnecessary to generate an aesthetic form to symbolize the space in *Ulysses*, and it constitutes the unique status of *Ulysses* as Irish modernist literature, as differentiated from First World modernist literature.

Jameson's reading of *Ulysses* in terms of the reconciliation between the aesthetic and the political is one indication of his understanding modernism as an unfinished Utopian project. With a recognition that the key to the successful fulfillment of the project lies in dereifying the now-institutionalized modernist texts, Jameson emphasizes the necessity to presuppose canonical modernist works as "failures," not successes. Fundamentally, an aesthetics of failure—whose ethos is, needless to say, linked to the meaning of Utopia as the impossible—characterizes Jameson's reading of every Utopian modernist work; the images of death and failure—which are at the heart of Being, according to Jameson—as the precondition for imagining utopia are ubiquitous, and the experience of suffering and violence are elevated as if it were the only route to the "impossible" Utopia. The most salient example of this is found in his reading of the socialist realist novel, *Chevengur* by Andrei Platonov, in the chapter "Utopia, Modernism, and Death" in *The Seeds of Time*. Here Jameson's search for the essential

[14] Jameson points out that every encounter in *Ulysses* is always already linguistic, as Joyce himself said about "the last great talkers" (166).

consistency between Utopia and death culminates in the beautification of the suicide of the protagonist, Dvanov, romanticizing one of the most tragic socialist novels: " . . . it is not the function of Utopia to bring the dead back to life nor to abolish death in the first place; death is so deeply inscribed in this Utopia that it begins and ends with an exemplary suicide" ("Utopia" 110). What is problematic about his reading is not that he tries to discover a connection between death and Utopia in the novel, but that his reading of the socialist realist novel contradicts the intention to engage with socialist realism he announces in the beginning of the essay: " . . . in the west modernism is over and our approach to the older classics of modernism must necessarily be a mediated and a historicist one for which we have as yet worked out few enough historiographic protocols" ("Utopia" 79). Moreover, what one sees in his textual analysis is less the mediation between a concluded First World or western modernism and what he calls second world modernism as evidence of alternative and even Utopian literary forms, ("Utopia" 78), but the subsumption of the latter into the former. It shows the impossibility for Jameson of getting out of the western modernist episteme that he tries to overcome.

## Beyond Modernism: Raymond Williams and Edward W. Said

If Jameson's emphasis on the liberating formal energy of modernism ultimately echoes Adorno's endorsement of aesthetic modernism—it is not an accident that, in the conclusion of *Aesthetics and Politics*, Jameson projects a new realism that would "resist the power of reification in consumer society" ("Conclusion" 236), repeating Adorno's argument in essence— Raymond Williams shares the problematic of modernism that

Lukács had fundamentally defined, but renews it as a contemporary issue of modern theory itself. As Mary Gluck rightly argues in her essay "Toward a Historical Definition of Modernism: Georg Lukács and the Avant-Garde," Lukács's discontent over modernism mainly had to do with not just aesthetic questions, but politico-philosophical ones of historical continuity and traditions:

> [My desire] to hold on to the great literary traditions of the past and present didn't stem from any kind of 'conservatism,' but from a longing for a contemporary art that is capable of artistically shaping and depicting our own problems on the level of the old art, in a way that is at the same time contemporary and yet a continuation of a past. It is for this reason that I turned against that shortsighted and limited artistic cry which insisted breaking with the nineteenth century: the century which is, of course, not only the century of Goethe and Thomas Mann, but of Karl Marx as well. (qtd. in Gluck 882).

Similarly, what Williams notices in conventionalized modernism is its inability to achieve self-consciousness as a historical movement; simply put, "without Dickens, no Joyce. But in excluding the great realists, this version of Modernism refuses to see how they devised and organized a whole vocabulary and its structure of figures of speech with which to grasp the unprecedented social forms of the industrial city" (*Modernism* 32). If Jameson and Adorno discover in the great modernist works what Jameson calls modernism's "trans-aesthetic vocation" to go beyond itself and reach the realm "in which aesthetics and ethics, politics and philosophy, religion and pedagogy, all fold together

into some supreme vocation" ("Reification" 80), Williams sees the same modernism as going too far, elevating itself into the realm of the absolute, as if it had never belonged to human history.

For Williams, the politics of modernism is not also unrelated to the status of modern literary theory. If modernism was an aesthetic and ideological response to the crisis of what Edward Said names "filiation"—"linear, biologically grounded process, that which ties children to their parents" (*Beginnings* xiii)—the current status of modernism, which has consistently gained its philosophical nourishment from modern theory, indicates that the crisis of affiliation has succumbed to the reproduction of filiative relationships within social affiliation. Williams blames the crisis upon the failure of modernism to consider itself subject to the movement of history, and its blindness to its own internal contradictions. For him, what was (and is still) offered as modern literary theory in the West from the 1960s "as if it had not . . . been comprehensively analyzed and refuted" (*Modernism* 167) is the recurrence of early formalism, which was itself a reaction against a crude sociologism. Following Medvedev and Bakhtin, Williams identifies formalism as the theoretical consequence of Futurism, in which "extreme modernism and radical negation of the past is combined with complete absence of inner content" (qtd. in Williams 167), but he also endorses the formative and positive element in it, namely its great specificity: "its detailed analysis and demonstration of how art works are actually made and gained their effect" (167). Being unable to consider its specificity itself as historical, however, led formalism away from some key forms of specificity, "under the cover of a selective attention to those versions of specificity which

Medvedev and Bahktin defined as the Formalist assumption of an 'eternal contemporaneity'" (167).

Williams's diagnosis of modern theory as the absence of "the socially and historically specifiable agency of its making" (172) resonates with Edward Said's criticism of recent literary theory's "religious" tendency; under the sway of semiology, deconstruction, and even the archaeological descriptions of Foucault, Said complains, the notion of "text" has been transformed into "something metaphysically isolated from experience," and loses "the messier precincts of 'life' and historical experience" ("Exile" xviii).[15] Said notices many unnecessary efforts toward defining what is "purely" literary, in particular, and problematizes what Williams calls the "language paradigm" of the modernist escape route that the obsessive pursuit of "purity" in literature ultimately depends on. Instead, what Williams and Said similarly suggest is the "real" work on language, impure and secular in essence: "a systematic and dynamic *social* language, as distinct from the 'language paradigm,'" which does not exclude the language of works "marked as temporarily independent and autonomous" (Williams, *Modernism* 174, original emphasis).

> And then with the return of language, in any full sense, we enter the most available evidence of the full and complex range of agencies and intentions, including those agencies which are other than analytic and

[15] In "Secular Criticism," the introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said categorizes the practices of today's literary criticism into four major forms—practical criticism, academic literary history, literary appreciation and interpretation, and literary theory. He makes clear that what he calls "critical consciousness" or secular criticism can only be practiced outside and beyond these four accepted forms, as they represent in each instance specialization and a precise division of intellectual labor. This leads him to emphasize the necessity for criticism to be between the dominant culture and the totalizing forms of critical systems (1-5).

> interpretive: creative and emancipatory agencies, as in Fekete's correct emphasis that 'the *intention* of emancipatory praxis is prior to interpretive practice.' Precisely so, because any such social or cultural or political intention – or, we can say, its opposite—is drawn not, or at least not necessarily, from the objects of analysis but from our practical consciousness and our real and possible affiliations in actual and general relations with other people, known and unknown. (174, his emphasis)

Williams and Said's imagination of a new realism, therefore, ultimately involves the movement from the unknowability of modern experience to the need to see "actual human societies as knowable entities" (*Country and City* 247), pregnant with a "collective consciousness" in Williams, for the imagination of a new community, and "critical consciousness" in Said to grasp the secularity of literature and life.[16]

Williams and Said's sense of the real does not contradict the imaginary, and for them, the exploration of the real always involves a search for new possibilities for life through the investigation of what is intolerable in the present. As will be shown further in the dissertation, their theory resonates in many ways with the spirit of the neo-realistic works explored in this dissertation. It is through the medium of these works of art that one comes to the realization that realism is not so much a literary mode as an attitude to life, if we can remember the old lesson by Medvedev and Bakhtin: "Works can only enter

[16] It is worth pointing out the difference between Williams and Said in understanding the notion of "culture" and "the common." If Williams see in them both the opposing power to a notion of competitive individualism as well as the force of resistance to dominant authority, Said considers culture not as a communal term, but as a term of a system of exclusions by which some are identified as inside, in place, common, belonging, while others are designated as outside, excluded, anomalous, and lacking. That is, for Said, the power of culture as a system of discriminations and evaluations is nothing other than the power of the State, and this understanding of culture leads Said to insist on the significance of not being fixed in a certain culture, being in-between cultures, or being an exile.

into real contact as inseparable elements of social intercourse . . . . It is not works that come into contact, but people, who, however, come into contact through the medium of works" (qtd. in Williams 173).

## Outline of the Dissertation

In the chapter, "World Literature and the Place of Realism," I examine recent scholarship on the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee's novels and analyze the degree to which the process of making and reading the post-colonial canon is influenced by the demands of western aesthetic tastes. The political implications of literary form and the issue of South African literary realism beyond the modern western episteme have always been Coetzee's main concern, but they have not been explored by critics with the same significance as his (post-)modernist textual practice—the allegorical and deconstructive tendencies of his oeuvre infused with the overtones of the privileging of textuality. I observe that Coetzee's attention to the potentials of literary realism comes to the fore in his late works, in particular, in which he almost challenges the dominant interpretations foisted on his novels as postcolonial allegories. Through a realist lens, I look at the dimensions of Coetzee's work that are not typically addressed. Specifically, I analyze his Australian trilogy, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) to explore the turning point of Coetzee's voluntary distancing from the "South-Africanness" of his national origin where in his late style he speaks of the future of realism in postcolonial literature.

"After Magic: The Emergence of Latin American Narco-Realism" reads the current work of Latin American neo-realists as a reaction against magical realism, which has long been the brand of Latin American literature since the worldwide popularity of Gabriel García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). While addressing a new era of political strife, along with its attendant social realities, I show how the work of emerging Latin American neo-realists try to redefine the continent in their literary articulations. Through my textual analysis of the Colombian writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez's novel *The Sound of Things Falling* (2011), in particular, I investigate how one of the so-called narco-novelists achieves a sober realism through the defense of truthfulness and reveals the ethical dimension of political life as essentially collective.

The periphery's neo-realistic visions traverse the various expressive forms of media. In the chapter, "Between the Core and the Periphery: Semi-peripheral Neo-realist Cinema and Ethics after Modernism," I explore in detail the relationship of peripheral thinking to the history of aesthetic forms in the core by taking up the case of South Korean literature and cinema. South Korean cinema, in particular, has long struggled with the conflicting desire to be responsive to western expectations of Third World cinema, on the one hand, and to be liberated from its desire for recognition, on the other. By analyzing how this dilemma is reflected and finally negated in Chang-dong Lee's *Poetry* (2010), I suggest a new direction in world cinema in which the traffic in ideas flows from East to West.

In the final chapter, entitled "Deleuze, Affect Theory, and the Future of Realism," I critically discuss mainstream postwar theory's suspicion of all forms of representation

as such and its ultimate denial of agency. The current prominence of affect theory is particularly chosen for the object of my analysis; I show how affect theorists whose ideas have been significantly influenced by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze restrict the functions of consciousness, representation, and agency to rigid codification, despotic power, and authoritative unity. Examining how affect theorists' understanding leaves no possibility for representation to be rethought as a meaningful faculty to create effective ways for the self to engage the world, I argue that the task of imagining a new realism after modernism can begin only after our re-appropriation of representation as an affirmative procedure that brings one closer to the world again.

# II. World Literature and the Place of Realism

## II.1. Peripheral Realism and Its Discontents

The past decade has witnessed radical questioning of what "world literature" signifies in the age of globalization. Across the full range of literary and cultural studies, the inquiry involved a self-reflection upon traditional intra-European preoccupations in world literature and actual moves to construct more inclusive literary scholarship. David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?* (2003), for example, promulgated its basic tenet of all literary works' necessity to enter the world "beyond their culture of origin," to be globally circulated in different historical period in order to be "worldly" (4). In her seminal work, *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) and subsequent research, Pascale Casanova, while being attentive to the unequal and hierarchical distribution of literary capital in transnational literary space, highlighted the potentials of the worldly force of relative autonomy that the literary space holds. Franco Moretti, particularly drawing on the one and unequal process of international capitalism, claimed to grasp world literature not as a canon of masterworks nor a mode of reading (as in Damrosch), but as a system, structured not on difference, but on inequality in his famous essay "Conjectures on World Literature." Most recently, Emily Apter, in her provocatively entitled book *Against World Literature* (2013), evoked an attention to the blindsided concept of "the Untraslatable," as opposed to the prevalent assumption of translatability that she argues the recent attempts to revive World Literature rely on.

Despite the variety of their specific theoretical focal points, the world literature debates so far indicate that a great deal of effort has been made to reinvent world literature in a manner that is both ethically and politically responsive to the peripheries. That reflections on the righteous movement of the world literature debates should not be considered exhaustive, however, has something to do with the fact that the affirmative gesture toward literature from different worlds so far does not seem to have done enough justice to the literature from the peripheries. Especially so, when its stylistic "difference"—hailed by North American academia since the philosophical discourses of the concept gained great popularity with the rise of poststructuralism in the mid-twentieth century—derived from its geographical, economic, and cultural marginality, and therefore, is "too" radical, or "too" indigenous to be understood by the western modern mind.

The ongoing particular western evaluative criteria are generally based on, in the Warwick Research Collective's terms, "not comparison but incommensurability, not commonality but difference, not system but untotalisable fragment, not the potential of translation but rather its relative impossibility, and not antagonism but agonism" (6). The ideological vocabulary of this inherited poststructuralist framework—of the fragment, difference, and so on—is, in the last analysis, not dissimilar to what we have long known as a fundamentally modernist aesthetic. And thus, my aim in this chapter is to show to what extent modernism, as the unexamined mainstream aesthetic in the metropolitan book markets, has participated in the process of making so-called "Third World celebrities," pushing its dialectical pair of realism to the margins of the major literary

scene. The case study of J. M. Coetzee as currently one of the most renowned Third World writers in the North American academy comprises the second part of the chapter. In addition to casting a critical eye on recent scholarship of "Coetzee Studies" that has reinforced the reception of Coetzee as a South African Beckett, I bring his main concern of realism—in his Australian Trilogy, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007)—to the fore, and suggest a possibility to read him against the grain.

Resummoning the dialectical opposition of realism and modernism can be particularly useful in examining the present debates of world literature. One notices that in the conflicted modernizing Third World, realism, whose aesthetic and political potentials have been considered already worn out in the West, is still saluted as a meaningful weapon in cognitive and cultural struggle or else returns after a period of modernism as if it had been historically oppressed. Our post-structural fear of the act of defining, classifying, and categorizing in favor of the seemingly modest values of uncertainty, undecidability, and indetermination makes it difficult to argue with the opposition, but I believe that the two specific conceptual categories of realism and modernism are still viable, as long as we are conscious of the historical continuity of the terms; the dialectical tension between realism and modernism that actually upsets rigid classifications has shaped our recognition of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in an important way. And investigating the current subordinate status of realism whose practices are newly imagined in the margins of the world can allow us to see the blindness of the center when it offers an understanding of literature from other parts of

the world. It is true that many writers from the periphery are deeply involved in that same modernist aesthetic as a release from the relentlessly political and quotidian realities of underdevelopment that they seek to escape or transcend. However, it is also because they want to be read by metropolitan audiences, and it is essential to analyze how this desire has significantly affected both form and content of peripheral literature.

It would be ill-advised to simply suggest anti-modernist realism as an easy alternative to the prevalent hegemony of modernist aesthetics or to propose a necessity to return to classical realism as if modernism as a political and aesthetic project has never been fruitful. However, it is indolent to accept modernism as our terminus, as if it were fixed in our present moment and there were no ways we could think beyond it. That the innovations of modernism have somewhat lost their criticality and are not sufficiently efficacious in the changed, globalized literary system has been consistently pointed out, but attempts to ponder the dominance of modernism are minimal. It seems that many find the comfort zone of modernist aesthetic intellectually challenging and thus pleasant; the abstruse and somewhat arcane traits of literary modernism, for example, have offset the guilty comfort one feels within the zone. In this sense, Edward Said's warning in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) that "there is a danger that the fascination of what's difficult—criticism being one of the forms of difficulty—might take the joy out of one's heart" (30), needs to be modified. One notices today that a fascinating difficulty can be a consistent cause of the joy and the comfort of some intellectual minds as long as it remains enigmatic; it allows them to legitimately dwell in the notion of impossibility as a sophisticated way of doing criticism or to accept all-encompassing interpretations

comfortably without taking a specific critical positon. In effect, modernism's dominance in our time is closely linked with its impossible balance; the aesthetically satisfying qualities of modernism are claimed to be both political and ethical at the same time. Said's statement above becomes only true when it is backed up by his other remark on the role of critics; that is, we should always have a critical eye on whatever is "dominant," since dominance always "involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet as a social institution or even project" (qtd. in Said 29). It is out of this kind of fundamental obligation that I urge the necessity to be strategically oppositional to the hegemony of modernism, with a "critical consciousness" in its Saidean sense, and look into the historical process through which modernism has had far-reaching global influence at the expense of other possible practices that needed to be systematically jettisoned for its ascendency.

The influences of the ascendency of modernism in the North American academy, especially in the particular fields of postcolonial studies and world literature, are well documented in the recent issue of "Peripheral Realisms" published in the *Modern Language Quarterly* (Vol 73, 2012). In this special issue, Joe Cleary shows how modernism was essentially the literature of an interregnum between the dissolution of the old Paris-centered literary world system and a new kind of the U.S. cultural imperialism: "Repudiated as decadent in Moscow, condescended to or ignored in London," modernism "was taken into custodianship by New York (with generous backing from Washington)

and bolstered the United States' own cultural prestige as a new cosmopolitan-minded world power" (263), and it promulgated "a more radically cosmopolitan idea of literature" (261). He admits that modernism did start as an attempt to expand literature both cognitively and spatially, trying to invigorate the field of postcolonial studies, in particular, which mainly offered access to new types of critical materials from a wide range of different countries. As modernist criteria in the US academy predominated, however, postcolonial studies also started showing an inclination toward modernist credentials, causing it to be institutionalized in the 1980s and 1990s in a somewhat uniform and one-sided way. Cleary explains the crucial outcome as the following:

> . . . one consequence of this development is that postcolonial studies has privileged modernist-associated terms such as hybridity, polyphony, pastiche, irony, and defamiliarization rather than realist-associated conceptual categories such as historical transition, class consciousness, and totality. Ultimately, this has had a detrimental effect, since it has meant that postcolonial studies has not only often ignored postcolonial realisms but also lacked intellectual criteria by which to evaluate postcolonial modernisms and magic realisms other than those generated by or largely immanent to those modes to begin with. (266)

The resultant underappreciation of realism also meant the replacement of the frame of class politics with ethnic, racial, or gender politics whose representation was certainly

political in intent, but was not always at odds with the cultural logic of capitalism, as Žižek famously argued.[17]

The modernist criteria of aesthetic innovation in postcolonial studies have gained momentum since the 1980s with the rise of certain highly publicized Third World writers whom Timothy Brennan in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997) and other articles calls "Third World cosmopolitan celebrities" ("Cosmopolitans" 2). Represented by Mario Vargas Llosa, Bharati Mukherjee, Derek Walcott, Isabel Allende, and Salman Rushdie, the new cosmopolitans, Brennan argues, interestingly enhanced the role of the West with their special focus on the western metropolitan city; their emphasis of the global nature of everyday life, rife with the rhetoric of nomadism and diasporism and the modernist "innovation" and "discovery," brought about an ironic consequence of the justification of western tastes. Those writers of the so-called "resistant literature" in Cuba, Angola, and Vietnam, for example, who practiced it usually in the form of literary realism, could not find a critical arena for a serious discussion of their ideas, as they were too easily identified as the advocates of a new state power, which tends to be associated in some radical minds with another reductive territorializing schema launched in an attempt at recodification; Deleuze, for instance, reduces it to the logic of "the State has made you ill, the State will cure you" (253) in "Nomadic Thought," allowing it no alternative value. For him, this kind of "schema" is supposed to "fall back on the despotic and bureaucratic organization of the party or State apparatus" (260).

[17] See his article, "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism" (*New Left Review* 225 (1997): 28-51.

The general marginalization of realism in the North American academy, in this sense, is not unrelated to this intellectual mood around the new cosmopolitanism that the selective groups of Third World writers have consciously or unconsciously promoted. Rooted in the post-Cold War modernist movement of the U.S. for its own cultural authority, the new cosmopolitanism fitted the aesthetic and political scope of new immigrants whose declaration of cultural hybridity offered, in Brennan's words, "certain advantages in negotiating the collisions of language, race and art in a world of disparate peoples comprising a single, if not exactly unified world" ("Cosmopolitans" 7). As the pluralism of the new cosmopolitan had settled down, the spirit of "being in-between" slowly gained ascendency over an aggressive sense of nation, home, community, and belonging; the significance of not being fixed in a certain nation, being in-between cultures was fervently addressed and discussed by critics, and the dispossessed or abject bodies of the subaltern subjects started to be interpreted as positive symbols of an increasingly globalized world.

While the Third World celebrities' "familiar strangeness" has added an exotic flavor to the collection of World literature, offering a sort of official Third World approval and material evidence of the new cosmopolitanism, the persistence of the seemingly anachronistic mode of realism that survived and underwent consistent mutations after modernism in the margins of the twentieth-century literary world-system has been systematically ignored. The current work of South American neo-realists and South Korean new realist cinema, for example, is indicative of the peripheral worlds' recognition of a necessity to move beyond modernist practice whose aesthetic and

political strategies might be efficacious at an individual level, but is too limited to amount to a common program; the neo-realists in Latin America have witnessed the inefficaciousness of magical realism that fantasized Latin America as an uncontrollable and fantastical continent. A similar movement towards political realism is discovered in South Korean cinema as well; the new realism, or *Shin Sasiljueui* found in the recent Korean films suggest one way to reimagine political realism as a sort of urgent, ethical program "after" modernism that is considered still a luxury to the general public suffering in the deadlock of social regression and economic pressure under the rule of the allied forms of political conservatism and neoliberal capitalism.

Yet, these varied forms of realism are rarely assured of their introduction to the international art world, not because they are difficult for the parochial tastes of the western public—they are actually difficult for their indigenousness, rooted in too alien histories and mythologies. The familiarity of the western public with traditional realism gives rise to an easy impression that the Third World artists still perform outmoded practice—but because they are radically "different" and their styles allow less room for aesthetic sympathies. In Jameson's words, this lack of sympathies has to do with "some deeper fear of the affluent about the way people actually live in other parts of the world—a way of life that that still has little in common with daily life in the American suburb" ("Third World Literature" 66):

> The way in which all this affects the reading process seems to be as follows: as western readers whose tastes have been formed by our own modernisms, a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to

> come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read. We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share. The fear and the resistance I'm evoking has to do, then, with the sense of our own non-coincidence with that Other reader, so different from ourselves; our sense that to coincide in any adequate way with that Other "ideal reader"—that is to say, to read this text adequately—we would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious to us and acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening—one that we do not know and prefer *not* to know. (66, original emphasis)

A compromised position between this fear of the complete Other and the liberating value of "difference" appeared to be Third World cosmopolitanism as the western critics' new object of desire; not too distant but also not too familiar, it ensures an appropriate degree of otherness that satisfies modern minds of sophisticated political and aesthetic tastes. After all, the issue with the current status of world literature seems to be, then, despite all its disposition towards the ethics of alterity, it did not embrace difference to the fullest, in its true sense.

### II.2. J. M. Coetzee and the Realism of Embodiment

One of the Third World writers who has benefited from modernist taste cultures is undoubtedly J. M. Coetzee, an author and academic from South Africa. His Foucauldian

understanding of history as a kind of "discourse," with his interest in the constitutive role of language as a novelist and linguist and his European heritage has attracted many western literary critics. And they formulated a sort of "Coetzee Studies" whose nature is significantly (post-)modernist—how many academic articles on Coetzee's novels have been reproduced in which the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) is the textual evidence of the Spivakean unknowable other, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) is a sort of Derridean trace, and the tongueless Friday in *Foe* (1986) is a guardian of absolute absence? What has been ignored in the canonization of Coetzee, however, is the political implications of literary form and the issue of South African literary realism beyond the modern western episteme, which have always been Coetzee's main concern. The tension between realism and modernism is particularly intensified in his late works—his so-called Australian Trilogy: *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007)—but the tension exists in his better known, earlier South African novels as well. Looking at the dimensions of Coetzee's work that are not typically addressed with the same seriousness as his modernist textual practice through a realist lens may complicate the dominant interpretations foisted on his novels as postcolonial allegories, helping to understand ways in which Third World writers unwittingly but systematically participate in the establishment of the modernist aesthetic as the dominant mode of literary critique in world literature.

Coetzee's writings are utterly oppositional—oppositional in the Saidean sense that critical consciousness in his work refuses to be reduced to a doctrine or a certain political positon, but closer to Adornian resistance when it comes to the actual practice of

the opposition; despite the difference between the contexts of South African literature and of the European modernist cultures of Adorno's description, he shares the similar fear of relentlessly totalitarian history in the politically overdetermined conditions of South Africa ("I have never known how seriously to take Joyce's—or Stephen Dedalus'—History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" [*Doubling* 67]). Hence Coetzee's skepticism towards the activist tendency of political novels with hope-filled optimism in South Africa. Furthermore, Coetzee tries to evince the emancipatory potentiality of art through his strategic way of representing history, which he says is unrepresentable: "History may be, as you call it, a process for representation, but to me it feels more like a force for representation, and in that sense, yes, it is unrepresentable" (*Doubling* 67). And his determined pursuit of "Grace" that he defines as "a condition in which the truth can be told clearly without blindness" against "Cynicism"—"the denial of any ultimate basis for values" (*Doubling* 392)—resembles in many senses Adorno's modernism, unflinchingly truthful in its nature, whose act of defying the burgeoning instrumentalism and total administration that surround modern man reveals itself as critically oppositional.

In fact, the epistemological and methodological affinity in resistance between Adorno and white South African authors was noticed as early as 1987 by Neil Lazarus, who pointed out the political efficacy of aesthetic modernism in Coetzee's oeuvre in "Modernism and Modernity: T. W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature." With rich and ungarbled understanding of Adorno's philosophy, what Lazarus pays attention to is the acute self-awareness of white South African authors, "the

manner in which their work enters into history—or, more precisely, refuses to be encoded seamlessly into history, where history is understood, . . . as the relentlessly totalitarian and reductive discourse of the oppressor" (135). Coetzee's fidelity to Adornian modernism is particularly highlighted in his discussion; his ethical rationalism, fundamentally humanist, is considered faithful to modernism's original tenet, as Lazarus tries to rescue both modernism and Coetzee's aesthetics from all too easy attempts to regard them as "proto-deconstructionist" (154).[18]

Lazarus's appreciation of the way white South African authors resist by writing, how they keep bringing unforgettable history back to reality rejecting oblivion and reification—"All reification is a forgetting" (qtd. in Lazarus 140)—culminates in the conclusion of the essay where he shows the deepest sympathy for the writers whose strategic modernist negativity is too often mistaken for mere passivity.

> It would be too much to claim these white writers write for the revolution. Such a task is no longer theirs, if, indeed, it ever was. Instead, they write *against* apartheid, where the core of their resistance consists in the practice of truth and in contestation of the legitimacy of official ideology. . . . The task that white writers in South Africa have shouldered is that of pulling

[18] Lazarus complicates the conventionally held contrast between Adornian modernism and Lukácsian realism by arguing for affinity between what their aesthetic projects ultimately pursued—the affinity derived from their same intellectual debts to the "critique of Romanticism elaborated in the *Aesthetics* of Hegel" (138). According to Lazarus, Adorno could be thought of as "more thoroughly Lukácsian than Lukács himself" (137), as he, following Lukács, explored the theory of reification within the same Hegelian traditions, and pursued, with greater intensity, the Hegelian idea that "all significant art is in its nature implicitly critical, since in the dialectic of its form—as matter and ideas—it succeeds in counterposing a utopian image to its representation of the world as it is" (138). However, this analysis skims over what is incompatible between Adorno and Lukács—on forms of organization, on the ideology of form, on decisionism, and so on.

> back from oblivion the memory and continued existence of radical white opposition to apartheid. (155, original emphasis)

Such a task might not be theirs, and to oblige them to write for the revolution can be certainly disturbing. What can be equally disturbing, however, is to regard South African writers who have decided to pursue the task to write for the revolution, unlike Coetzee or Gordimer, whose politics are more often than not measured against that of their modernist counterparts, as merely outdated, naïve, and less refined for their explicit passion and actions. Our modernist sensibilities that have been slowly but substantially internalized tend to intensify the belief that the implicit way of resistance is not only intellectually more appealing but also politically much more successful as its subtle, nuanced (non-) messages are less subject to capture by the oppressive state power; it situates the committed political writings in South Africa as a half-thought, amateurish act of resistance out of immature passion and outright indignation against oppression before they reach a sort of modernist awakening, and therefore, doomed to fail ultimately. The ongoing prejudices unreasonably deprived the politically committed writings of the opportunities to be studied as, for instance, a logical consequence of serious reflections upon the radically different socio-economic and cognitive context of their time and place, to which western modernist aesthetics is inadequate for producing change. Thinking this way requires our changed recognition of modernism; it is only possible when we think of modernism not as an evolutionary denouement of our politico-aesthetic practice but as an insufficient project whose historical fruits cannot be universally guaranteed, and which we might need to think beyond. The prevalent phenomenon of the emergence of neo-

realism after modernism in the global periphery evidences that the periphery has already confirmed the pale face of modernism and decided to renew what is already familiar, with a critical understanding of the paradoxical newness of what is repeated.

Aside from Lazarus's less sensitive coupling of Coetzee and Gordimer as white modernist South African writers, whose resistance strategies are clearly distinct,[19] what he does not question is a possibility that the writers' pivotal mission of "stubborn truth-telling" (Lazarus 140) might not find the best form in the mere representation of the victimized South African people, planting a seed for hope—Michael K's obsession with pumpkin seeds and his decision not to join history to keep the idea of gardening—without directions of how to grow it. He keeps arguing that Coetzee's modernism should be thought of as socially meaningful historical act, full of awareness of the South African reality, but he is less concerned about how the complacent "meaningful" act can amount to an "effective" strategy in the specific South African context where the social nature of literature is still expected to have much to offer.

Furthermore, some of the rich and versatile layers of multiplicity in Coetzee's oeuvre, which have not been fully explored as they should, make it hard to refer to his work as entirely modernist. Despite Coetzee's notorious evasiveness in interviews (he is self-conscious of his reputation as "an evasive, arrogant, generally unpleasant" [*Doubling*

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[19] In "The Idea of Gardening," her review of Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*, Gordimer points out the insufficiency of Coetzee's "deceptively passive protagonist" despite her overall evaluation of the novel as a great work. For Gordimer, Coetzee's heroes are "those who ignore history, not make it," and she notices in *Michael K*, in particular when he decides not to join the guerrilla "because enough men had gone off to war and it's the time for gardening," the denial of "the energy of the will to resist evil." As a faithful reader of Lukács, Gordimer is certainly more sensitive to the writerly responsibility of suggesting a way to take part in the determination of the course of history, whereas Coetzee remains indeterminate. To Gordimer's inquiry of Michael K's agency, Coetzee made another elusive response, saying "the book about going off with the guerrillas . . . is not a book I *wanted-to-write*" (*Doubling* 207-208, original emphasis).

65] interviewee) derived from his skepticism towards the genre of the interview itself—"In my experience, writers rarely have much of interest to say about their own work for the simple reason that they cannot be expected to act as their own critics" ("Interview" 852)—it is not difficult to see how much academic effort has been made to position Coetzee as a South African Kafka or Beckett; the most well-known collection of his interviews, *Doubling the Point* (1992), serves as one example, in which almost every interview question is geared towards an attempt to establish Coetzee's endeavors as late modernist while Coetzee keeps dodging the force of the questions to define him. At one point, the editor of the collection, David Atwell, is quick to interpret Coetzee's suspicion of modernism as his repudiation of Lukácsian realism—Coetzee actually seems to have had a different understanding of what Attwell meant by modernism here—and move to define his work Adornian, in which Coetzee shows little interest (201). In another interview where the first question asked of Coetzee is about Beckett's influence on the writer, Coetzee bluntly says: "Let us not overstate my involvement with Beckett. There are writers who have meant more to me than he has. But leaving that aside, let me try to answer your questions" ("Interview" 847). His nuanced responses and reservation are not analyzed as much as they deserve, and the elusiveness and ambiguity of his writerly attitude itself ends up being treated as if it were a marked evidence of his modernism embodied.

Coetzee in several interviews admits his admiration of Kafka and Beckett when facing questions on the affinity between his and their works, and it is well known that he wrote several pieces of critical writing about them, including his doctoral dissertation on

Beckett.[20] What he is particularly attracted to in Kafka's fiction is his opening up a possibility "to think outside one's own language" (*Doubling* 198), what Coetzee calls "the moments of analytic intensity" (199). As for Beckett, Coetzee acknowledges that his dissertation was driven by Beckett's "language-sensibility [that] was both personal and communal, Beckettian and Irish" ("Interview" 848), and he clarifies that he wrote it as "a child of the times, the times of formalism and then of structuralism, with their debt to science and their own quasi-scientific ambitions" (848). What makes the impacts of the great writers on Coetzee's fictions more interesting, however, does not seem to lie in their possibly cognitive and stylistic similarity that interviewers are eager to hear of, but in how Coetzee complicates his critical affiliation with Kafka and Beckett by withdrawing.

> Returning to Kafka: I have no objection to thinking of alienation as not only a position but a practice as well. From that point of view, alienation is a strategy open to writers since the mid-eighteenth century, a strategy in the service of skepticism. What I balk at is the common understanding of alienation as a *state*, a state of being cut off not only from the body of socially dominant opinion but also from a meaningful everyday life (this is implicit in Marx's account of the worker who loses touch with that his hands are fabricating), and even (in the old-fashioned psychological sense of the term) from oneself. (*Doubling* 203, original emphasis)

Beckett's prose, which is highly rhetorical in its own way, lent itself to formal analysis. I should add that Beckett's later short fictions have never

[20] The essays include "The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett's *Murphy*" (1970), "The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*" (1972), "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style (1973)," and "Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka's 'The Borrow'" (1981).

> really held my attention. They are, quite literally, *disembodied*. (*Doubling* 23, my emphasis)

The answers above requires us to explore Coetzee's particular attentiveness to the importance of body as embodiment, and the undeniable existence of physical fact as evidence of "something more historically substantial" (*Doubling* 63). His understanding of the embodied body is well explained through a contrast that he makes with fiction: unlike fiction "that is which is not" (248), body is not that which is not. And the way he proves it is by depicting the pain it feels, the "authority of suffering" of the body (248) with full ethical weight. Coetzee makes clear that he does not consider *Foe,* for example, as that much an ironical novel: "Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body" (248). His preoccupation with what he calls an "ethical weight" is indicated in his dismissal of Freudian psychoanalysis, whose pursuit of ethical impulses he thinks is incomplete due to its lack of proper ethical weight and thus needs to be overcome (244-245). And one way he carries the ethical responsibility in his work is by seeking a way truth can be stated in a realistic description of human suffering, the indisputable fact of physical pain, with no metaphor involved, as is exemplified in the torture scene of the prisoners in *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

> Then the beating begins. The soldiers use the stout green cane staves, bringing them down with the heavy slapping sounds of washing paddles, raising red welts on the prisoners' backs and buttocks. With slow care the prisoners extend their legs until they lie flat on their bellies, all except the

> one who had been moaning and who now gasps with each blow. The black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood. The game, I see, is to beat them till their backs are washed clean. (121)

In the discussion of the description of torture in his essay "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" (1986), Coetzee warns against a sort of obscene beauty that lyrical metaphors create in the description of the physical experience of torture. Explaining how a torture room provokes novelistic imagination for South African writers—"the dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation" (*Doubling* 364)—Coetzee goes on to say that the same kind of dark lyricism is not "a fault limited to South African novelists" (366) and also evident in the famous torture scenes in Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), but most vividly observed in Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972).

> From the beginning of his career, La Guma . . . ran the risk of immortalizing a Cape Town of seedy slums and dripping rain in a prose of somewhat lugubrious grandeur. In his presentation of the world of the security police, no matter how much he insists on its banality, its lack of depth, there is a tendency to lyrical inflation. It is as though, in avoiding the trap of ascribing an evil grandeur to the police, La Guma finds it necessary to displace that grandeur, in an equivalent but negative form, on

> to their surroundings, lending to the very flatness of their world hints of a metaphysical depth. (365)

Coetzee acknowledges that the romantic figuration of human suffering by dark lyricism constitutes one way that the game is played by the rules of the state, and a real challenge for writers should be to "establish one's own authority," by "imagin[ing] torture and death on one's own terms" (364). In Coetzee's oeuvre, the scars left by the violence of history are inscribed in the bodies of his characters, and the suffering bodies of the physically disabled figures—the barbarian girl's tortured body in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Friday's muteness in *Foe*, Michael K's defective lip in *Life & Times of Michael K*, and Paul's amputated right leg in *Slow Man* (2005)—that resist figurative language take the full authority; it is how history Coetzee considers basically unrepresentable finds one way to be represented. Written in the deformed bodies, history keeps claiming its continuity, remaining as indelible and inexpungible physical evidence of social violence and repression.

In his essay "The true words at last from the mind in ruins: J.M. Coetzee and Realism," Jonathan Lamb defines Coetzee's realism as the realism of embodiment—"the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things" (*Elizabeth Costello* 9)—originally pioneered by Defoe and explained by Coetzee himself as "pure writerly attentiveness, pure submission to the exigencies of a world which, through being submitted to in a state so close to spiritual absorption, becomes transfigured, real" (*Stranger Shores* 20). Exploring the possibility of the conditions under which realism that resists figurative language and the force of figuration that "overwhelms the univocal

language of things" (Lamb 179) can be compatible, Lamb reaches a conclusion that language that "*transfigures* it[the real]" (180, original emphasis) constitutes a condition of the possibility that the world becomes real: "the impurities of secondary meaning . . . contaminate[s] the real language, but they are necessary if it is ever to be uttered" (184). Indeed, it is one way that Coetzee mediates fiction—what is that which is not—and body—what is that which is, and the way he can justify his novelistic engagement with the real as a writer. Realism, in Coetzee, is affirmed not as things readily achieved but as that which is necessary to pursue for the possible mediation of the true (the ideal) and the real (the material). Hence realism, which fundamentally explores the relation between one and everyman—the particular and the universal—necessarily constitutes an unignorable part of Coetzee' project.

If Coetzee's interest in realism started from his serious reflection upon the relation between the existence of bare facts and how they should be uttered, or how ideas can be materialized—"what is the status of an idea *about* the necessity of embodied or materialized ideas," to put it in Lamb's words (178, original emphasis)—the later movement of his fictions shows that his initial reflection has evolved into a quite outright inquiry into what makes a true materialism. In one of his Australian Trilogy, *Elizabeth Costello*, the topic of realism is explicitly addressed by the narrator in the opening chapter of the novel, "Lesson 1: Realism." As if trying to answer the aforementioned question on the status of materialized ideas directly, the narrator says:

> Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence,

> can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations—walks in the countryside, conversations—in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world . . . . (9, original emphasis)

Costello, who "reclaimed Molly from Joyce" in her fiction *The House on Eccles Street* according to her critics (12), is not considered a particularly realist author in the novel, but she delivers a speech entitled "What is Realism?" at the acceptance of the Stow Award at Alton College in Williamstown, Pennsylvania. Referring to the uncertainty of Kafka's story "Report to an Academy," her speech is filled with nostalgia for the days when the "word-mirror" worked in a transparent way, when the words on the page "stand up and be counted, each proclaiming 'I mean what I mean!'" (19). When her son John, who accompanied Costello, asks her "why realism?" that no one wants to hear about any more, and says that, when he thinks of realism, he thinks of people in "smelly underwear" "picking their noses" ("What is your interest in it? And where does Kafka fit in? . . . You don't write about that kind of thing. Kafka didn't write about it" [32]), Costello's answer is simple and determined:

> No. Kafka didn't write about people picking their noses. But Kafka had time to wonder where and how his poor educated ape was going to find a

> mate. And what it was going to be like when he was left in the dark with the bewildered, half-tamed female that his keepers eventually produced for his use. Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping. That is where Kafka fits in. (32)

Two years later in her lecture at Appleton College in suburban Waltham, Australia, she recalls this speech that she made in the States and proclaims again that her remark should not be construed ironically: "It means what it says. I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean" (62).

Aside from the question as to whether one should trust what Costello says or not, or the question as to whether Costello truly ventriloquizes her creator Coetzee's beliefs as Bill Ashcroft believes[21], one thing noticeable is that Coetzee's engagement with the question of the real has been less exhausted than foregrounded in his later work, with renewed interests in the "ontology of the writer as agent of the writing" as David Atwell points out in "Mastering of Authority" (217). The significant presence of the writerly authority runs through the Trilogy, be it a philosophical meditation upon realism in *Elizabeth Costello* or the investigations into the quality of the Australian real in *Slow Man* or J.C.'s strong opinion in the language of reportage in *Diary of a Bad Year*. As

[21] See his essay "Silence as Heterotopia in Coetzee's Fiction" in *Strong Opinions: J.M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction* (2011).

Elleke Boehmer rightly observes in "J.M. Coetzee's Australian Realism," Coetzee in these fictions seems to feel more comfortable about his language referencing a "wider social world" in the form of "journalistic outline or sketchy reportage, or as a metonymic visual shorthand"; "In writing Australia Coetzee has kicked away some of the more abstract metafiction schemas that in South Africa underwrote his visual imagination, and has resorted to a referential vocabulary that at least superficially has a more immediate or less mediated relationship to the world that is being described" (5). Though janus-faced, the stories in their affiliations with the modes of realism are more explicit in revealing Coetzee's belief in the transcendental nature of authority in fiction for his bigger writerly goal of mediating the realms of the personal, the social, and the transcendental. Costello's almost Williams-esque belief in "No ideas but in things" highlighted in her frog story, in particular—"the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing" (217)—and her emphasis on the reality of the frogs, without regard for her own belief in that reality or the frogs' own indifference to her belief, becomes evidence of their existence itself, asks us to push our reading of Coetzee beyond the long-held interpretations foisted on him as an allegorical writer. One might be tempted to say that Coetzee allegorizes the impossibility of allegory itself here—this is Julian Murphet's claim in his recent article[22]—but the general modal transition in Coetzee's late style and the consistent tone in his argument for the power of the real makes it much more plausible to regard the frogs' story less as an allegory than, as Boehmer rightly argues, "an illustration of existence, of life, and hence, . . . of reality; of that which continues, eluding and resisting language" (15).

[22] See Julian Murphet, "Coetzee's Lateness and the Detours of Globalization," 3.

If Derek Attridge's point in his book *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* that Coetzee has always drawn on the power of realism, "on the vivid representation of a world, external and internal, into which the reader is invited" (201) is correct, Coetzee's later fictions seem to show that his displacement to Australia provided him with a more comfortable place where he could explore the tension between a realist and transcendental imperative in his work in full measure; that his late style was almost caused by his voluntary distancing from the "South-Africanness" of his national origin, his decision to relieve himself from the burden of a preponderant historical guilt. He has once said that the reason why he turned down job offers in Canada and Hong Kong after his failed attempt to immigrate into the U.S., was due to "a will to remain in crisis" (*Doubling* 337). Though he left South Africa "to be part of a wider world," Coetzee was rather self-conscious of the fact that he would only remain as a specialist in African studies "with my [his] rather European tastes" if he were going to accept any of the invitations. His move to Australia, in this sense, could be an alternative to bypass both options; the middle path to live as a writer in its entirety in the rather post-historical place of Australia positions Coetzee as a sort of symbolic exile, regardless of his Australian citizenship. And his newly chosen exilic positon created a place where he could talk about the "real" that he found impossible to discuss in his home that he identified as a place of "too much truth for art to hold . . . truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (*Doubling* 99).

In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987), Coetzee diagnosed South African literature as imbued with "feelings of entrapment, entrapment in infinitudes"

(97). He accentuated that the sheer freedom of imagination should come together with a "yearning to have fraternity" rather than "*the land* . . . mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers," that is "least likely to respond to love" (97, original emphasis).

> The veiled unfreedom of the white man in South Africa has always made itself felt mostly keenly when, stepping down for a moment from his lonely throne, giving in to a wholly human and understandable yearning for fraternity with the people among whom he lives, he has discovered with a shock that fraternity by itself is not to be had, no matter how compellingly felt the impulse on both sides. Fraternity ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality. (*Doubling* 97)

Coetzee articulates in the speech that what his fiction has involved, regardless of each novel's dissimilar situational specificities, is what it means to be "wholly human" (97). Due to the large scale of the project, and the universal nature of humanism that he seeks, Coetzee keeps himself from being occupied with the singular South African political situation. But the dominating theme of what being human entails has been present in his oeuvre from the first, as one notices from the relation between the magistrate's sympathetic attitudes towards the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: "the novel asks the question: why does one choose the side of justice when it is not in one's material interest to do so? The magistrate gives the rather Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of justice" (D*oubling* 394-395). His rather innocent belief in human justice that consistently infiltrates his fiction from *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) to the recent *Slow Man*, although the latter can be characterized as realist in its philosophical

outlook not in its literary style, implies that what grounds his ethics is a sort of true optimism for the future, with his novelistic but also real grounds for it.

Coetzee's late style in his Australian fiction in this sense can be thought of as a sign of his transition from an artistic confirmation of unrepresentable beings and an aesthetic attention to the aura around the sublime other—the strange beauty of the tortured barbarian girl and the mute Friday, for instance—to the pursuit of the writerly task of having to make the unknowable knowable. The task of the storyteller is already confirmed when Foe tells Susan Barton: "till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story . . . It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds." (It is also Foe who teaches Barton, when she becomes frustrated with her recognition that Friday might be willfully silent—"then I began to recognize that it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself, nor the accident of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me" (98)—that Friday has fingers—his body—to express instead of speech). In *Slow Man*, there is a degree of absurdity in Paul Rayment's affectionate feelings for his nurse Marijana Jokić, a Croatian refugee who takes care of the disabled protagonist, unlike the mysteriously appealing relationship between the magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The way Paul comes to face the bareness of his existential alienation via his love towards the object of his desire resonates with how the magistrate gets to the core of the brutal truth of colonialism in which he himself is involved. But this time there is less room for sympathy for the protagonist since Paul's romanticization of the power relation between him and Marijana, between the immigrant

intellectual and the immigrant working class woman, is manifested in the frequent moments of her more straightforward and explicit resistance to his desire. Her refusal is not expressed in verbal terms, as if speech were not allowed for her, but her willed muteness, which resembles Friday's willed submission, soon develops to a physical act of refusal—her intentional absence from work—and at this point, her body, her bodily non-existence, becomes her own sign, as Friday finds his "home" in a "place where bodies are their own signs" (157) in the mysterious ending of *Foe*.

*Slow Man*, in addition, is consistent, from the first, in revealing that its main interest lies in the investigation of what constitutes the real and what its impact is. Waking up at a hospital after the fatal accident that caused him to lose his leg, Paul says to himself: "*This*—this strange bed, this bare room, this smell both antiseptic and faintly ruinous—this is clearly no dream, it is the real thing, as real as things get" (9, original emphasis). His preoccupation with the thing itself is soon followed by his realization of the bodily pain that he feels as evidence of the present real:

> *Pain is nothing,* he tells himself, *just a warning signal from the body to the brain. Pain is no more the real thing than an X-ray photograph is the real thing*. But of course he is wrong. Pain is the real thing, it does not have to press hard to persuade him of that, it does not have to press at all, merely to send a flash or two; after which he quickly settles for the confusion, the bad dreams. (12, original emphasis)

If Michael K's endless and painful walking in Coetzee's earlier novel in *Life & Times of Michael K* allows the protagonist to be understood as a beautifully withdrawn nomadic

subject, less possibility is left in Paul's case that his physical pain could be considered metaphorical; his lost leg is what makes the protagonist disabled, what makes him "lost [lose] the freedom of movement" (25) (Paul's feelings for Marijana from the first derives from the fact that she, unlike other nurses, does not see him as the old man without a leg and treat him like a baby, but interacts with him as a "man hampered in his movements by injury" [28]).

In the cautiously designed pseudo-autobiographical form, fiction and the real compete against each other in Coetzee's later work. With the line between storytelling and autobiography blurred ("all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" [*Doubling* 391]), characters try to obtain full substance via their immense preoccupation with the relation between the real and the truth. It is significant, in this sense, that JC's corroboration of the real of the emotions in Dostoevsky leads to the final statement of *Diary of a Bad Year*—JC's belief in the "indisputable certainty" (*Diary* 227) that Russian realist writers provided, and how JC relates it to what he understands as an "ethically better" (227) artist. That the formal change in his late style was possible for his relocation to Australia tempts one to argue that Coetzee himself testifies to how the writer's spatial dislocation, Coetzee's own symbolic confinement of himself in exile, leads to the alteration of his style—that is, how material displacement induces formal transformations. Discussing the topic of "how to tell the truth in autobiography" (*Doubling* 392), Coetzee has talked about how the "alienness (not alienation)" rather than homesickness that he felt when he left South Africa at the age of twenty—which was recurrent with his time "on the fringes of the left without being part of the left" (394)—

actually grew to a sense of being outside a culture even when he was home—"not to be at home in one's home" ("Exile" 184), to borrow Said's words. This feeling of "alienness" is more positively pursued, though, in Coetzee's life, and it ironically brings him closer to himself; and finally, as he claims, "*autre*biography shades back into autobiography" [*Doubling* 394, original emphasis]). His destination of Australia, ultimately, provides the cautious author with a pseudo-Saidean exilic venue where he could further develop the "Dostoevskian confrontation between faith and skepticism" (248)—a place where he could fully perform the writer's duty from a "transcendental imperative" (*Doubling* 340) rather than society's call. For Coetzee, faith and skepticism are synonymous with "grace" and "cynicism," and he is not shy about defining them as "a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness" and "the denial of any ultimate basis for values" (392), respectively. The project that Coetzee adopted from Dostoevsky is essentially based on his hopeful belief in the possibility of the idea of justice and human awareness: "I don't believe that any form of lasting community can exist where people do not share the same sense of what is just and what is not just. To put it another way, community has its basis in an awareness and acceptance of a common justice" (340). At the place of non-belonging, which allows him to mediate allegorical transcendence (ideas) and realist immanence (things), lexis and praxis, Coetzee dreams of an ethical community, "a world where 'a living play of feelings and ideas is possible,' and people who are still entangled in 'abstract forces, of anger and violence'—thus not yet real—can actually take residence, that is, a 'world where we truly have an occupation'" (98). It is a move that

attempts to make people desire true being, by converting the place of alienness to the place of responsibility.

Coetzee once said that Defoe, one of the authors that he admires the most, is a realist in the only sense that he is an empiricist (*Stranger Shores* 19). Defoe, who was such "a loner at heart" wrote the kind of "novel" which is almost "fake autobiography," "the kind of recital his hero or heroine would have given had he or she really existed" (19). Coetzee is attracted to the liveliness of Defoe's work, its permanent historical quality. In many ways, Coetzee's late movement resembles Defoe's, and it shows that he started walking slowly out of his own difficulty "taking positions" (*Doubling* 205). He has started taking empiricism much more seriously than before, trying to forge his own form of realism between the two worlds. It is not a kind that says a meaning for the world yet, but it has started to say, at least, that it is possible to have a meaning.

# III. After Magic: The Emergence of Latin American Narco-Realism

## III.1. No More Magic: Against Exhaustion

"My work is a reaction to the idea of magical realism as the only way to discover Latin America. It's something that still many readers believe. And this is obviously something I strongly oppose. I don't feel Latin America is a magical continent. I feel Latin American history, is if anything, tragedy." In a bold and confident manner, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, a Colombian novelist of the new generation after the "Boom," points to the exhaustion of mesmerizing magical realism that has haunted readers of Latin American literature until recently. Vásquez continues:

> I want to forget this absurd rhetoric of Latin America as a magical or marvelous continent. In my novel there is a disproportionate reality, but that which is disproportionate in it is the violence and cruelty of our history and of our politics. Let me be clear about this. . . I can say that reading "One Hundred Years of Solitude," . . . in my adolescence may have contributed much to my literary calling, but I believe that magic realism is the least interesting part of the novel. I suggest reading "One Hundred Years" as a distorted version of Colombian history. (qtd. in White)

Even its staunchest defenders share in the general agreement that magical realism has lost its criticality and become an attractive, well-selling commodity worldwide. What follows magical realism? Vásquez appears to respond with his novel, *The Sound of Things Falling* (2011); the novel itself is forward looking despite the seemingly retrospective

narrative, as the narrator Antonio fumbles around in search of the lost past—"lost" not because it has been unspoken, but because it is buried in spontaneous oblivion—in order to understand the present. Vásquez's aspiration to redefine the continent of Latin America as a tragic one is deeply associated with his attention to the fundamental task of creating an alternative narrative of Latin American history, which he sees magical realism as having insufficiently carried out. While renewing Balzac's maxim that novels are the private histories of nations, he makes use of the tragic realm of the crime novel as a venue for investigating the tensions between memory and oblivion, the private and the public, and the past and the present. While joining the group of the so-called narco-novelists thematically, his version of the historical novel is more sober, as Antonio's journey to the past is navigated by the solid perspective of "truthfulness."

The beauty of magical realism, which has become a metaphor of the whole continent of Latin America after Gabriel García Márquez, would lie in the lesson that it has taught us: that the real does not contradict the imaginary and that the exploration of the real always involves a search for new possibilities for life through the investigation of what is intolerable in the present, as is well shown in Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier's magical worlds of realism, among others. In the blend of real and magical, Borges, for example, expresses both how reality is stranger than fiction and how even the most fictional creations have a worldly basis at the same time: his fictional Uqbar in the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" from *Ficciones* (1944) is based on the actual town of "Uqbar" in Algeria, or "Uqbara" in Iraq, of which he is known to have been aware. Also, Carpentier's vision of the marvelous in the real that he shows in *The*

*Kingdom of This World* (1949) captures the mystery immanent to the history of Latin America, penetrating the cruel political reality of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Santo Domingo with richly poetic language of both hope and despair. To repeat his proclamation: "What is the entire history of [Latin] America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?" ("Marvelous Real" 88). In spite of his links with the writers of Latin American magical realism, however, Carpentier's insistence on autochthony, as Timothy Brennan argues in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, had a "political rather than a cultural-nationalist meaning" (267), derived from his mixed feelings about the European avant-gardes. That is, the crude elements of ordinariness in his work are not registered to promote the "indigenous" as a place of the supernatural, the folkloric, and the mythic. This primitivist gesture is still practiced in discussions of Latin American literature, as if the continent only existed as a standard against which Western civilization can be conveniently criticized. Such an approach falls prey to the long-held stereotype of the Third World for its unwitting re-positing of the West as modernity's provenance. Rather, the criticality of Carpentier's marvelous real should be understood as lying in the way he embraces the features of "secularity" as an essential element of literature, and the degree to which he amplifies our perception of reality.

For the significance of the term and its influence on the "Boom" novelists thereafter, including Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Luis Borges and Mario Vargas Llosa, it is worth investigating what Carpentier meant by *lo real maravilloso* (the marvelous real), in the first place. As is well-known, the concept stems from his experience of staying in Haiti, where he noticed that thousands of men

believed in François Mackandal's power "to the extent that their collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution" ("Marvelous Real" 86-87). Finding himself in daily contact with it, Carpentier soon realizes that the marvelous real is not specific to Haiti, but can be extended to the whole of Latin America. He describes the essence of the marvelous real by contrasting it with European Surrealism, a movement in which he participated in France in the 1930s; that is, the marvelous, according to him, is "baroque" in its spirit and practice, as opposed to surrealism in which "everything is premediated and calculated to produce a sensation of strangeness" ("Baroque" 103) as a "*manufactured* mystery" (104, original emphasis)—Salvador Dalí's soft clocks, or the large snake in Pierre Roy's "Danger on the stairs" (1927). While the marvelous in Surrealism is not looked for in reality, the strange in the marvelous real, in comparison, is "commonplace, and always was commonplace" (104). It was a new literary opportunity for Carpentier to be able to express how the strange has already become the ordinary in contemporary Latin American history, as seen in the fact that "the first socialist revolution on the continent should occur in the country least likely to sustain a revolution" (107).

The original tenet of the marvelous real was less than an abstract style with a manufactured mixtures of images to transcend what is assumed as an objective reality than a sort of awakened attitude towards the history of Latin America—it is a style, of course, but a style "reaffirmed throughout *our* [Latin American] *history*" ("Marvelous Real" 83, original emphasis) that inheres in human realities. Defining the nature of the marvelous real as "the baroque," Carpentier highlights its forward-looking quality. For

him, the baroque is less an invention of the seventeenth century than what Eugenio d'Ors called "a *human constant*" ("Baroque" 91, original emphasis) which "arises where there is transformation, mutation or innovation": "baroque always projects forward and tends, in fact, to a phase of expansion at the culminating moment of a civilization, or when a new social order is about to be born. It can be a culmination, just as it can be a premonition" (98). His suggestion of Vladimir Mayakovsky, among others, as a monument of the baroque, and his critique of the German art critic Franz Roh's magical realism, located on the opposite side of his juxtaposition, indicates how the marvelous real was imagined according to its capability to depict the "strange" reality—the bizarre reality that is resistant to being captured by our familiar language. When Carpentier claims that it is a new language forged out of our "duty" to "depict the world" and "to uncover and interpret it ourselves" ("Baroque" 106), the marvelous real departs from the mere creation of heterogeneous effect through premediated images of the fantastic as in surrealist work—the French post-impressionist Henri Rousseau's "The Sleeping Gypsy" (1897), for instance. What Surrealism and Roh's magical realism lacked for Carpentier was, simply put, "faith" ("Marvelous Real" 87):

> The problem here is that many of them [surrealists] disguise themselves cheaply as magicians, forgetting that the marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality,

> perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state [*estado límite*]. To begin with, the phenomenon of the marvelous presuppose *faith*. . . . the marvelous invoked in disbelief—the case of the Surrealists for so many years—was never anything that is oneiric 'by arrangement' or those praises of folly that are now back in style. (86-87, my emphasis)

Carpentier's lament over the lack of faith in surrealism, and his diagnosis that the marvelous real is trapped in its poverty of imagination, resonates with Raymond Williams's observation in *The Politics of Modenrism* that avant-garde practice has been driven to conform to modernist styles, losing its criticality (34-35). Williams distinguishes avant-garde artists from the modernists of the late nineteenth-century in that the former was a "fully oppositional," and even aggressive group, whose members were the "millitants of a creativity which would revive and liberate humanity" (51). While both avant-garde and modernist movements were composed of alternative and innovative experimental artists and writers, and despite their common interests in rejecting tradition, emphasizing creativity, and affronting the bourgeoisie, members of the avant-garde identified themselves as the breakthrough to the future and were accordingly more direct in proclaiming political revolution based on the workers' movements. Their crucial difference becomes clear in Williams' respective description of each movements as "the organized working class with its disciplines of party and union" and "the cultural movement with its mobile association of free and liberating, often deliberately marginal individuals" (52).

Even the most faithful defenders of magical realism have admitted its changed status; as a commodity fetishized, with its magic lost in the comfortable consumption of the image of Latin American exoticism; "it's become kitschy, a commodity . . . It's getting so that when you don't know what to do with a character, you send her to heaven in a flutter of butterfly wings" (Stavans, qtd. in Margolis). It is often said that the experimental spirit of magical realism faded sometime after Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo, el Supremo* (1974), which led some Latin American authors to find an alternative to the commercialized literary genre. The McOndo movement was one of the attempts to seize the throne from magical realism, though it failed to reach a global audience. Proclaiming the death of magical realism, the authors of the McOndo movement, including Alberto Fuguet, Giannina Braschi, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Hernán Rivera Letelier, Jorge Franco, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Pia Barros, Sergio Gomez, tried to expel ghosts, flying women, and fantastic objects from the literary world of Latin America, and fill up the space, instead, with "McDonald's, Macintoshes and condos" (Fuguet 70). It purposely showcased the opposition between the central location of Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the natural world of exotic people in the literature of magical realism, and the contemporary urban Latin (American) cities that have been under the constant influence of the twentieth-century modernization and globalization. The project, launched in 1996 with a collection of short stories by 18 authors under the guidance of the co-editors, Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gomez, however, came across as too familiar and even shallow, with its presentation of the new landscape of the Latin American real as "big . . . crowded, polluted, with highways, and subways, cable TV . . . five-star hotels built with laundered

money" (qtd. in Margolis). Alberto Fuguet himself introduced an attack on the movement in "Magical Neoliberalism"; "McOndo was little more than a neoliberal, even fascist, manifesto suggesting that the poor had been all but erased from the continent and that the new Latin American fiction was no more than the rants of U.S.-style alienated rich kids" (71). This might be too dismissive, but it is hard to deny that McCondo writers were, in their strategies, not original enough to go beyond writers that are "far too powerful," such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortáza, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez (72). Their desire to go global but remain rooted in the local ended up producing all-too-familiar novels for American readers living in a multiethnic society in the age of globalization.

No wonder that the first short story submitted by Fuguet to a U.S. magazine was rejected for the reason that "it wasn't Latin American enough" (qtd. in Margolis). No matter how the McOndo movement is evaluated, this episode, as well as his critique of magical realism as the dominant mode of Latin American literature, asks us to confront the difficult inquiry of how to achieve the specificity of the local without condescending to it, however charitably: "Latin America is quite literary, yes, almost a work of fiction, but it's not a folk tale. It is a volatile place where the 19th century mingles with the 21st. More than magical, this place is weird. Magical realism reduces a much too complex situation and just makes it cute. Latin America is not cute" (Fuguet 69). Caught up in his mission to divest Latin American literature of its "cuteness," Fuguet pursued the global to such a degree that McOndo ended up producing only another form of ethnic literature,

mimetically reaffirming the age of global diversity, without being able to suggest to us something new—an unfamiliar perspective on Latin American literature.

The McCondo movement, however, was also a sign that it might be the time to unseat the lame duck of magical realism and to think instead about new responses to the contemporary political and social strife of the continent. Roberto Bolaño, who is best known for his posthumous novel about Mexican homicides, *2666* (2004), can be thought of as one of the mainstays who worked in this spirit. He departed from his contemporaries in Latin American literature, whom he described as "imitators of a magical realism made for the consumption of zombies" (271). Diagnosing how magical realism lost its revolutionary traits and became "the aesthetics of globalization" (qtd. in Denning 51) as it has dominated the world literary field, Bolaño attacks some of the writers whose magical realism caters to the market taste, calling "the sacred cows of Latin American Literature, especially the boom" "the rancid private club full of cobwebs presided over by Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, Fuentes, and other pterodactyls" (qtd. in Moya). Also, he was fairly critical to McOndo generations for their empty cosmopolitanism and "programmatic rebellions imitating North American or European fictions" (Deckard 353). Bolaño tenaciously reformulates realism less as a problem of the distinction between the realistic and the fantastic than as a question of "ways of seeing" ("Interview").

Similarly, we notice most recently that a new crop of writers in Mexico and Columbia, in particular, pursue a new form of realism along the same line of Bolaño's inquiry, but through the creation of a different regional genre called the "narconovela."

The so-called Latin American neo-realists working on the genre have turned their backs on Márquez's fantastic world to shed light on the darker sides of the continent. In Mexico, there has been a flood of narco-literature, narco-cinema, and *narcocorridos* (narrative folk songs), enjoying widespread popularity since the 1990s. And in Colombia, narco themes have been explored both in the novels of Fernando Vallejo, Jorge Franco Ramos, and Juan Gabriel Vásquez, to name a few, and in such films as *Rodrigo D: no futuro* (*Rodrigo D: No Future*, 1990) and *Maria, llena eres de gracia* (*Maria, Full of Grace*, 2004). Jorge Volpi, a novelist and essayist from Mexico City, states that the popularity of narconovelas stems from the Mexican playwright Óscar Liera's *El jinete de la divina providencia* (*The Rider of Divine Providence*, 1991) and the Colombian writer Vallejo's *La virgin de los sicarios* (*Our Lady of the Assassins*, 1994). While noting that many writers in Colombia and Mexico created "one of the essential features of the so-called narconovels" by giving a "literary patina to the language of the narcos" ("Narconovelas"), Volpi laments how the portrayal of Mexico as a world of spectacular violence in most of the works makes the genre a well-consumed commodity in the international markets:

> In these books [narconovelas], Mexico is portrayed as a violent, uncontrollable and fantastic world in contrast to the West, which consumes drugs without suffering or being scarred by the violence of the trade. . . . These and other books created a world that transcended stereotypes and became a paradigm repeated incessantly in novels, TV serials and films: a universe dominated by danger, death and the

> unforeseeable, a world of pathetic heroes and villains increasingly hard to tell apart—poor adolescents who become professional killers; beautiful young girls used as a medium of exchange; gunmen killing one another for no reason other than to fill an existential void; clumsy, ill-paid cops, almost always corrupt; and, of course, a few narco bosses transformed into multimillionaires, notable for their outsize eccentricities. These were new romances of chivalry in which no one knows what he's fighting for; where, as the corrido says, "life is worth nothing"; where acts of heroism are extreme and rare; and where staying alive past 30 is a kind of victory. ("Narconovelas")

Volpi's targets are, among others, Sergio González Rodríguez's *El vuelo* (*The Flight*, 2008), Mario González Suárez's *A wevo, padrino* (*Hell Yes, Got Father*, 2008), "Heriberto Yépez's *Al otro lado* (*On the Other Side*, 2008), Rogelio Guedea's *Conducir un trailer* (*Driving a Trailer*, 2008), Hilario Peña's *Malasuerte en Tijuana* (*Bad Luck in Tijuana*, 2009), and *Luis Humberto Crosthwaite's Tijuana: crimen y olvido* (*Tijuana: Crime and Oblivion*, 2010). In such works, the authors dramatize the dangers of life in the narco-world of Mexico, devastated by drug trafficking and its attendant violence. Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola's extensive study of how Latin American literature has become labelled by falling prey to the strategies of global marketing, and how magical realism and narco-literature were two of these labels, seems to justify Volpi's concerns.[23]

Volpi's criticism that narco-literature is a nostalgic attempt to revive the idea of Latin American literature, taking the place of magical realism in the minds of readers in

[23] See Herrero-Olaizola's "Publishing Matters: The Latin American 'Boom' and the Rules of Censorship."

the West, has a point; it suffices to mention the popularity of the Netflix gangster drama *Narco* (2015). His generalization that narco-literature is just a marketing device, however, needs to be reconsidered as it, most of all, neglects to see the local constitutions of literary form in each dissimilar political and cultural field. Furthermore, Volpi disregards what has caused the Latin American authors to create what we can call a form of "neo-realism" by choosing a different path than magical realists followed; saying that both magical realism and narco-literature are mere marketing ploys leads to an indolent critique, as it fails to raise an important question--why narco after magic? Gabriela Polit Dueñas asks that we go beyond framing narco-literature as "a paradigm of production," or "a label of easy marketing," and "explore the impact narco trafficking has on the production of literature in several regions of Latin America" (4). If we agree with her premise that within the Latin American cultural context, it is still common that "a political or social phenomenon propels the development of literary genre, or that it motivates artistic manifestations" (3), the task of exploring the inquiry of why narco has succeeded magic becomes more significant.

One of the authors of narco-narratives, Juan Gabriel Vásquez provides us with an important hint on the potential of narco-literature in his work *The Sound of Things Falling*. Depicting the shared experience of the narco cultures of Columbia, drug trafficking, wars on drugs, and drug-related crimes, Vásquez suggests how narco-literature avoids the danger posited by Volpi of indulging the nostalgia of those who want to recover the idea of Latin-Americanness and portrays instead the common realities of the diverse people of the continent. Hermann Herlinghaus, in this regard, argues that "in

today's narco narratives, the affective realities of the Global South are expressed" (ix). In the narco narratives, "the realities of hemispheric narcotics traffic and informal travel are taken as a lens for problematizing the revamping of North-South conflicts under the pressures of advanced neoliberalism. These narratives point to an imbalance that has become strategically sensitive" (Herlinghaus 34). The narco is a symbol that cannot be omitted in describing the country of Columbia; Vásquez moreover shows how the narco is as much a reality as a symbol—not a thing of the past, but a force that still leaves its traces on the country. At the same time, Vásquez's version of the narco-novel refuses to take the road to cheap melodrama and Hollywood movies to focus on "how the drug trade affects somebody not involved in it; somebody who—like me—has never seen a gram of coke in his life" ("Interview"). The narco has been everywhere in the continent, so prevalent that it is impossible not to narrate its effects. Both magic and drugs are intoxicating, but Vásquez's narrator Antonio's journey to the tragic history of Columbia reveals how much sobriety it involves to restore memory from the nation's communal oblivion. Both magic and drugs are haunting, but Vásquez is unambiguous about suggesting that what has haunted the country as much as flying women, mythic figures, and the mysterious power of the supernatural, is the apparition of the tragic Columbian past, which has captivated its people, devouring their present moment. Unlike the stories of magic that lead us to feel inebriated, Vásquez's narrative of the narco sobers us up, showing how only the moment of awakening, led by an uncompromised defense of truthfulness, allows us to proceed toward a future out of the dismal present suffused with symptoms of the violent past.

## III.2. Juan Gabriel Vásquez's *The Sound of Things Falling* and the New Historical Novel

"The first hippopotamus, a male the color of black pearls, weighing a tone and a half, was shot dead in the middle of 2009" (3)—the novel's first sentence implies that the country has not yet learned how to mourn the death of the hippopotamus, a figure of the undead that looms large in *The Sound of Things Falling*. One is even tempted to say that the novel is all about the hippo: the creature represents in turn Ricardo Laverde, a former aviator and prisoner, the exploration of whose life is a task for the narrator and the main character Antonio Yammara; then Antonio himself; and finally the history of Colombia. As is indicated from the first line of the novel, Vásquez is more interested in the remains of the past, after the death of the drug lord and trafficker Pablo Escobar, than in the suspenseful and sensationalist narratives that have circulated about his notorious drug cartel. By implying that the hippo provides a link through which the lives of all Columbians are connected, Vásquez, from the first, shows straightforwardly how in Colombia one's individual life is inseparable from the shared fate of the collective.

The news about the death of the poor creature who escaped from a deserted zoo once owned by Escobar reminds Antonio Yammara, a young law professor at a university in Bogotá, of the former aviator and prisoner, Ricardo Laverde, whom Antonio met in a billiard hall in the capital. For Antonio, remembering Ricardo well "has become an urgent matter" (5), so he decides to investigate the prisoner's mysterious life, which seems to intersect with his own, by throwing himself into the "damaging exercise of remembering" even though he believes it will bring nothing good but only "hinder our

normal functioning" (5). It is implied from the first in the novel that Colombia, even almost 20 years after its most turbulent and violent times, is still haunted by the past, and that the whole generation who lived through the 1980s seems to suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. Relating Colombian reality to the task of storytelling, Vásquez states, "You have to ask why, 30 years after all that began, they are just popping up everywhere. The reason is that we haven't got to the bottom of that. We haven't really understood why that happened, what the consequences of those years are. So we tell stories" (qtd. in Montgomery). Not yet knowing how the mysteries of Ricardo's experiences could ever relate to his own or even to the fate of the country, Antonio, Vásquez's fictional alter ego (their relationship resembles that of James Joyce and Stephen Dedalus), decides to follow his sheer interest in tracing the "story of his life" (5). For a narco genre, the rest of the novel is pretty quiet. Without any rambunctious scenes of drug-dealing or violent crimes, it focuses on the silent suffering of ordinary people who have "never seen a gram of coke," like the protagonist himself. By emphasizing such people, Vásquez also departs from Márquez's allegedly "single and narrow perspective" (Polit Dueñas 111) in his only narco reportage, *Noticia de un secuestro* (*News of a Kidnaping*, 1996), which focuses on elite professionals as the sole unfortunates of the narcos' violence.

What is most haunting, for Vásquez, is rather, again, the mute pain of ordinary people, and he chooses to concentrate on hearing the sound of things falling in their everyday lives: a rain of bullets, plane crashes and explosions in mid-air, tears over assassinated human bodies, etc. Because the spectacular scenes of violence involved in

this history of Colombian narco trafficking are depicted in such a placid way, the novel almost arouses the feeling that the turbulent events only happened in the pathological mind of the protagonist. As the story unfolds, it shows how Antonio starts his journey to be able to mourn the death of the hippo, i.e, the drug-infused Colombian past, in a proper manner; however, one soon realizes that his journey can be only completed by his awakening to the connections between his trauma and the Colombian collective memory. The latter has been repressed at will for its life-threatening preponderance, and Antonio's search for the lost memory suggests that the "dysfunction" (55) at both individual and national levels can only be normalized through a process of externalization in Columbia, where the abnormal has become the normal status of being and almost no one, including Antonio's therapist, tries to seriously question it. "Politicians were murdered; bombs went off in Bogota all the time, aimed at district attorneys and the intelligentsia. You were afraid violence could touch you at any point. It was amazing how easily you get used to that—how normal a life you can lead" ("Interview"), Vásquez recollects; the narco-related violence was so omnipresent, with its consequences penetrating every corner of society, that not narrating it would be impossible. If Freud thought of externalization as an unconscious defense mechanism, Vásquez redefines it as a conscious, active human practice of revisiting the essence of the past to discover its correlation with the national, collective illness. Vasquez explores what he calls the "darker corners of Colombian history that have made us what we are now" ("Interview") through his character Antonio, in the novel, whose journey to the truth slowly sheds light on the darkness by bringing the hidden back to reason. It is a process in which Antonio,

as an individual specimen of humanity, gains the historical consciousness necessary to approaching the truth of Colombian reality.

That his mission is a life-shattering one for Antonio is implied in the depiction of his personality, particularly in his occupation as a law professor. The safe zone where he can shelter in "the double abyss of authority and knowledge" (7) from the unknowable real world, enabled him to sustain himself in those days when his life didn't seem to belong to himself. Students' admiration for him was "like a drug," (8) he confesses, and its resultant intoxication provides him with an enjoyable distance from the youth who "gesticulate and shout and lose themselves in ridiculous arguments in their attempts to find . . . the ideas of Law and Justice" (8). Still, readers sense that Antonio's propensity for lucidity will soon contradict his cynicism in his unknowable world, as the novel hints at his attraction to legal studies for its secretless theoretical world, a world unlike his shadowed reality. That he wrote his thesis on "madness as grounds for exemption from legal responsibility in *Hamlet*" (7) foreshadows this novel's reversed ending, in which he takes full responsibility to be awakened from the madness that has dominated Columbian history.

Relating his feelings and memories to others in his generation, whose key stages are punctuated by Escobar's significant commissions of murder, Antonio realizes how the private existence of individuals has been always intertwined with the public history of the country:

> I was fourteen years old that afternoon in 1984 when Pablo Escobar killed or ordered the killing of his most illustrious pursuer, the Minister of

> Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla (two hit men on a motorcycle, a curve on 127th Street). I was sixteen when Escobar killed or ordered the killing of Guillermo Cano, publisher of *El Espectador* (a few steps away from the newspaper's offices, the assassin put eight bullets in his chest). I was nineteen and already an adult, although I hadn't voted yet, on the day of the death of Luis Carlos Galán, a presidential candidate, whose assassination was different or is different in our imaginations because it was seen on TV . . ." (10)

But it is not until the mysterious Ricardo, whom he got to know in a Bogota billiards hall but to whom he "didn't pay too much attention" (12), is killed in a drive-by on the street before Antonio's eyes that Antonio decides to leave the realm of stability only to find how the lives of all Colombians, including his family and friends, are conditioned by the country's past. That is, the gun attack, in which Antonio is also seriously injured, serves as a goad for him to feel that he is nothing other than another Ricardo in their shared fate of falling: "My legs no longer held me up. Ricardo fell to the ground, and I fell with him, two bodies falling without a sound, and people started to shout and in my ears there was a continuous buzzing" (46). They are connected via violence and pain, but if there is one difference, it is that Antonio survived, unlike Ricardo, and thus he can take up the task of asking questions, or starting to ask questions, at least. "A life unlived, a life that runs through one's fingers, a life one suffers through while knowing it belongs to someone else: to those who don't have to suffer" (14). For the first time, Antonio begins to question the sort of life in Colombia, a place that "live[s] outside of time" where "reality

adjusted—as it doesn't often to—to the memory we[they] have of it" (71). His therapist asserts that "any dysfunction is normal," and his not-at-all unusual situation "would eventually pass, as it had passed for all the others who had visited his office" (55). His wife Aura furthermore reasserts that the same incident would not happen again, but Antonio refuses to let it go. While his doctor diagnoses him as suffering from agoraphobia, he feels the opposite—"a violent claustrophobia was what was tormenting me [him]" (65)—and he chooses to get out of "the closed world" of disguised stability.

Antonio's journey to the silenced truth is a matter of abandoning the given stability of his life; he departs from this stability not to wander aimlessly but rather to return with a definite perspective that does not seem to be achievable except by his leaving his home first. It means that he needs to refuse his loving wife Aura's desire for him to stay with her and their newly born daughter Leticia in their realm of law where she would like to dwell without any disturbance. When Antonio asks Aura why she has chosen law as her major, Aura answers, "to be able to stay in a single place"; "Lawyers can practice only where they've studied, said Aura, and she no longer felt able to postpone that kind of stability" (29). Aura is faithful to the place of law, the sedentary, and the lucid, but Antonio realizes that it has been clouded, and only flight from its false reality would allow him to get to the essence of its "aura." In a notebook that his doctor gave him for the therapeutic benefit of writing, he can only write two words, "what," and "why" (67). And he knows that he can only answer his own questions by distancing himself from the familiar place. Accordingly, he becomes nomadic, but only temporarily; he leaves his home, but only to return with a new way of seeing that will help him

demystify Colombian reality. Guided by "the scar on his belly" (73) that he shows to people as evidence of his trustworthiness in the community of shared suffering, his journey is a resistance to sedentariness and to the oblivion that supports the sedentary world. Sobriety is a requirement, and his traveling to the forgotten past reveals how painful it is to revisit things that have been hidden, how difficult it is to stay awake and resist oblivion.

As the title *The Sound of Things Falling* implies, the pain is rather heard than seen in the novel. Listening to the black-box recording of the flight on which Ricardo's wife Elaine died transforms the death of "strangers"—Elaine "*is not, will never be, one of my* [his] *dead*" (88, original emphasis)—to something of his own:

> However those sounds now form part of my auditory memory. Once the tape fell silent, once the noises of the tragedy gave way to static, I knew I would have preferred not to have listened to it, and I knew at the same moment that in my memory I would go on hearing it forever. No, those are not my dead, I had no right to hear those words . . . but the words and the voices of the dead had already swallowed me like a whirlpool in a river swallow up a tried animal. . . . Experience, or what we call experience, is not the inventory of our pains, but rather sympathy we learn to feel for the pain of others. (88)

His listening to Flight 965's black box creates a moment when he moves from the importance of not forgetting to the impossibility of forgetting. The black box survived the accident and went through two owners before Antonio finally gets to listen to it, and he is

fascinated by how the black box seems to keep claiming its history. When it finally has come to "form part of my [his] memories," Antonio decides not to go home yet, as home is the Hamlet-like realm where he can be exempted from responsibility by choosing to be mad or intoxicated. Instead he resolves to "keep living in the black box, with the black box" (91).

Still at this moment, though, Antonio is ignorant of the relation between his own pain and that of others. He feels "sympathetic" to the sufferings of the dead, hence his attempt to get to the core of the silenced truth, but one can only be sympathetic when there is a clear non-identity of the self and the other; one cannot feel "sympathetic" to one's own pain. And this is where Maya Fritts, Ricardo's daughter, appears as a mediator between Antonio and Ricardo, giving him a hint at the link between the self and the other, and furthermore, the individual and the collective. As a fellow truth-seeker who has gone through the same turbulent eighties and is afraid to confront the truth about her father, Maya becomes an important comrade on Antonio's journey to the truth. When she states that she is orphaned, but suffering from "the gaze of absent ones" (117), as she feels that Elaine and Ricardo keep watching her, one sees how much her present is, like Antonio himself, devoured by the apparition of the past. They are haunted for the same reason: they do not know what happened to Elaine and Ricardo, and therefore they do not know what happened to Colombia. She hasn't yet reached the dark core of the dead's history. To Maya's request to help her unearth the truth of her father by telling her about the end of his life, Antonio answers with silence. When he asks her if she could do the same for him, Maya provides the same response of silence. Looking at Maya settled

down into her hammock the same way he himself was in his, however, Antonio realizes that it was all he wanted to know. He feels that they share the same words, the words sketched out in Antonio's head when he tried to write something in his diary, "*I want to know*" (138, original emphasis), and believes that their shared desire to "know" will guide them to the truth.

They share what they know to understand how the dead can take up so much space in their lives and thereby to get out of their mutual, "contagious" fear (149). Antonio tells her what he thought he knew, as well as all that he remembered and what he feared he had forgotten. Maya also shares with him a family archive made up of letters, recordings, and newspaper clippings that she has collected. The stories told in a form of "confession" (138) lead us to Ricardo's youth as a pilot, his involvement in drug trafficking from Colombia to the United States, and his final arrest, which led to a twenty-year sentence; and also to the life of Elaine, who arrived in Colombia as a volunteer for the Peace Corps and returned to the United States when the violence in Colombia started to intensify. When the pieces brought by Maya and Antonio are put together, one realizes that they form nothing other than a personal version of Columbia's history. Elaine, who first came to Colombia "to have an enriching experience, leave her mark, do her share, no matter how small" (152), is made fun of by the locals, including Ricardo, for the naïvete of her mission. Her love for Ricardo incites her desire to discover Colombia's place in the world, to leave her safe position as a visitor and her pretension to be a "social missionary, a Good Samaritan for the Third World" (197), and from that moment, Elaine tries to be part of the country by living its history herself. She protests

with Ricardo against the Vietnam War, but as a mediator between the First and the Third World, she also participates in social events organized by the American community in Bogotá. When the annoying, sarcastic lines of a Frank Zappa song that Ricardo used to sing enthusiastically to deride the mission of the Peace Corps—"What's there to live for? Who needs the Peace Corps?"(190)—suddenly enter her mind, hummed in her head, however, she feels that Colombia is finally within her; she is pregnant with Maya.

Again, the private existence of individuals is intertwined with the public history of the country; Maya is born "in July 1971, more or less at the same time President Nixon used the word war on drugs for the first time in a public speech" (216). The history of an individual is told through public events in Colombia, which shows how individuals are already born in the shared fate of the community. Elaine complains in her letter to her grandparents about *Cien años de soledad*, a book she received as a going-away present; she writes that she has tried to read it but the Spanish is very difficult, and there is even a typo on the cover of the novel in its 14th printing. When she says that it is the most tedious thing she has read in a long time, one detects Vásquez's playful riposte to magical realism. Her whining that "everybody has the same name" (180) in the novel, however, constitutes a symbolic statement about the whole country's familial modes of living beyond just Márquez's magical world. As is asserted by Maya later, they are one in their communal destiny in Colombia: "That's the great thing about Colombia, nobody's ever alone with their fate" (254).

This very fact of shared destiny helps Antonio realize that the truth about Ricardo he has been trying to discover was, from the first, the truth of his own life. The image that

he conjured up when he put on a man's shirt in Maya's house, in which he looked like Ricardo, becomes the real, when he reaches an "inexplicable" and "confusing" (152) understanding of the identity of Ricardo and himself. At this moment, he no longer feels sympathy, but an extreme solitude: "The discomfort of knowing that this story in which my name did not appear spoke of me in each and every one of its lines. All this I felt, and in the end all my feelings were reduced to a tremendous solitude, a solitude without a visible cause and therefore without remedy. The solitude of a child" (152). The solitude is homologous to the kind of essential loneness of aviation that Ricardo felt as a pilot while he was in the air: "the air gets cold, it's noisier, you feel more alone. Even if someone's there. Yeah, even if there's someone with you" (219). But the extreme solitude in Vásquez's novel does not lead to an easy conclusion of alienation; in the community of shared destiny, even the solitude is shared. The dead's loneliness is shared by the living, and the solitude of the past is joined by the present. Solitude serves as another link in Colombia, a connection that shows how each and every individual is united via the somber feeling.

This union of feeling is shown to the fullest in the novel's climax, when Antonio and Maya re-visit Hacienda Nápolés, Escobar's luxurious estate where he owned a zoo. Surprised by the possibility that they might have visited it on the same day when they were little, Antonio feels that they are united by some "unexpected and unjustified solidarity" (269). Together, they feel the necessity to re-visit the deserted zoo, "a symbol of the same things for both of us [them]" (269), and dare to see Escobar's house, its desolateness, the remains of their common past, which "was there without being there"

(270). They confront every kind of fear and memory that it evokes with a complete but shared silence. When they finally encounter a stray hippo, whom Maya considers a baby female, at thirty steps away from them, one almost feels that their journey to the past was to meet the hippo. As Maya and Antonio undertook that journey so that they could understand their history, the creature of the past also studies them gravely:

> The hippopotamus, male or female, juvenile or full-grown, didn't bat an eyelid: it looked at us, or looked at Maya, who was leaning over the wooden fence and looking at it in turn. I don't know how much time went by: one minute, two, which in such circumstances is a long time. Water dripped off Maya's hair and all her clothes were a different color now. Then the hippopotamus began a heavy movement, a ship trying to turn around in the sea, and I was surprised to see such a long animal in profile. And then I didn't anymore, or rather I saw only its powerful ass and thought I saw streams of water sliding over its smooth, shiny skin. It wandered away through the tall grass, with its legs hidden by the weeds in such a way that it seemed not to make any progress, but just to get smaller. (272-273)

Maya thinks of the creature as a beauty, while Ricardo says that it's the ugliest animal in the world (272). When Maya worries about the future of the stray hippos that were once owned by Escobar and have since escaped from the zoo after his death, Antonio realizes how Ricardo said the same thing when they first met in the billiard. The hippo as the remains of Colobmia's tumultuous eighties connects the lives of Colombians, reminding

them that it remains as the living dead, a thing of the past that has survived to the present. Maya said, “Everything seems smaller” (268) when she and Antonio arrived at the zoo; Antonio likewise notices the hippo wander away as it disappears from his view, “in such a way that it seemed not to make any progress but just to get smaller” (272-273). The ultimate confrontation with their common past indicates that Antonio’s journey is about to be wrapped up, and at this point, it becomes clear that his journey, whose purpose was unknown even to himself, led him to encounter the stray hippo. It is at the end of the journey when one sometimes gets to understand its beginning; a story had unfolded completely only at the destination where the significance of its beginning is revealed ex post facto.

Vasquez overturns modernism by converting its privileged novelistic genre—psychological fiction—into something that looks more like the Lukacsian historical novel. Motivation—or in Lukács’s word, perspective—regains its importance in Vásquez’s new historical novel. What appears aimless—his traveling to the past—at first turns out to have been motivated by something to which the protagonist unwittingly held onto; his desire to understand himself has been driven all along by his unconscious need to accept the nation’s history as his own. Rosecrans Baldwin argues in his review that *The Sound of Things Falling* is a “more of a metaphysical detective story where cause and effect can be difficult to pin down,” and “the events that matter most occur inside characters.” Unlike his argument that Vásquez “has taken the psychological novel and made it political,” however, what Vásquez manifests in this pseudo-detective story is the intertwining of the psychological and the political, where seemingly psychological events

cannot be explained without referring to their situatedness in the structures of the outer world. In his destiny, complicatedly woven with the lives of others, the history of the individual is already collective, and his particular individuality turns out to have originated from the historical peculiarity of his generation. Vásquez's new historical novel is, in this sense, utterly realist, not because it meets the unjustifiable criterion of plausibility but because of its suggestion of the possibility for men to "comprehend their own existence as something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them" (Lukács, *Historical Novel* 24). On his journey to achieve historical awareness of himself, history is also written afresh; the process is interactive.

The novel's use of detective or mystery conventions best serves Vasquez's purpose to create a new historical novel, as it allows the protagonist to be guided by his solid desire to define his feelings of loss and fear, rather than sinking indulgently in abstract emotion. That is, Antonio's action, going back to "the exhausting work of memory" (280) to recognize the present's imbrication with the past, is a prerequisite for his own ability to proceed toward a future in which he wouldn't be mired in fear. His journey to the past in the novel is a vertical movement: Antonio descends as he patiently listens to the sound of things "falling" in Colombia, including the crash of Flight 965 from the back box. Antonio feels that the sound made by Flight 965 "in some absurd way was also the sound of Ricardo's life, tied irremediably to that of Elena Fritts," and that of his own downfall as well "which began there without my [his] knowledge" (285). The sound of the city's downfall, which produced fugitives like the writer himself, is

amplified by the voices of the Bogotán poet Aurelio Arturo's "Ciudad de Sueña" ("City of Dream," 1929), a poem Antonio keeps thinking about in the end of the novel:

> *I'll tell you that one day I saw a crazed, arrogant, swarming city burn through the night . . . Unblinking, I watched it collapse, and fold like a rose petal under a roof*
>
> […]
>
> *It burned like a loin, amid forests of flame*
> *and the cupolas fell and the walls fell*
> *over the beloved voices and over the broad mirrors*
> *. . . ten thousand howls of pure resplendence!*
> *and they were the flames like my own hair,*
> *red panthers set loose in to the young city,*
> *and the walls of my dram burning, toppling,*
> *like a city collapsing in screams*. (293-294, original emphasis)

"The beloved voices of the poem" becomes the voices of his family, "Aura's voice and Leticia's voice" (294), and when he returns home after his experience of the city "collapsing in screams" is over, he has difficulty in breathing at first. As seen in Antonio's description of his return as a movement "from sea level to the altitude of Bogotá," his journey is proven to correspond to the experience of the crash of the Flight 965 into the sea. He feels "the lack of oxygen that my [his] heart was demanding," as if he were just rescued from drowning. The only difference is that he survived, unlike Elaine, but he is left alone in a new reality in which his wife left him with their daughter.

The novel is inconclusive, ending with with the protagonist's multiple questions about what he will do next; Vasquez does not inform readers whether Antonio will reunite with his family or not. But this obscure conclusion at least allows the understanding that, whichever path he chooses to take, he will not remain what he was before he started the journey.

The retrospective self-knowledge that Antonio achieves by traveling back to the past, however, does not seem to function as an imaginary resolution, or a sort of soothing reconciliation with the Colombian past. As the ending scene of the novel implies, it only appears to demonstrate how the demand of the recognition of oneself is destabilizing, and might change the course of one's comfortable life completely. Comparing magical realism to conventional realism, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris argue that realism "intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realties—in short, that realism functions ideologically and hegemonically" (3); by contrast, magical realism, despite maintaining the term realism upon which it builds, "resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism" (6). Their analysis of a close affinity between forms of magical realism and postmodernism, and the elevation of the latter's liberating effect for its "decentralizing" quality, demonstrates, however, how their understanding of literary realism is based on a common stereotype of what they call "conventional realism." As Vásquez shows in *The Sound of Things Falling*, narrative closure in literary realism, for one thing, does not correspond to ideological closure, as Zamora and Faris seem to think. Rather, the usual "ideological" role of narrative closure

in the novel is inverted here, and the recognition that the protagonist achieves in the novel leaves him desolate. Zamora and Faris consider the "intentionality implicit in the conventions of the two modes of magical realism and realism" (3) as an essential difference between them. It is true that the necessary mediation of perspective is written into realism, but the perspective is not a given that the writer from the first can take but is uncovered and seized self-consciously as the writer pursues the arduous task of "a deeper probing of the real world" (Lukács, "Realism" 34). As reality does not manifest itself to the writer, he needs to put himself to the labor of "penetrat[ing] the laws governing objective reality and to uncover[ing] the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptive networks of relationships that go to make up society" (35).

Vásquez's new historical novel, therefore, actively resists the inert understanding of literary realism as a copy or reflection of reality. Expressing his fascination with realist fiction over magical realism and his obsession with writing history, he makes clear how, for him, realism is less a literary strategy than "a way of being in the world":

> My favorite novelists are people who seem to be fascinated by other human beings, by their hidden areas, and they take that into their novels. Perhaps that's why a certain tradition of realist fiction is much more important for me than magical realism. Novels such as Dostoyevsky's "Demons," Conrad's "Lord Jim," Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," down to (W.G.) Sebald's "Austerlitz" and Philip Roth's "[The] American Trilogy" have informed my writing much more than "One Hundred Years of Solitude." What do they have in common? They are built around an

> investigation of sorts into somebody else's life. They are built around the basic human impulse of curiosity—knowing what the other is like, what secrets he has, what is he hiding. This is not a literary strategy. It's a way of being in the world. (qtd. in Nance)

Following Conrad's idea that "novels go into dark places and come back with the news" ("Interview"), Vásquez shows how writing a historical novel is an already future-oriented task. If it is someone else's past that devours the protagonist's present in *The Sound of Things Falling*, his "going into darker places" of the Colombian history is to reclaim the past as his own to be able to proceed a future where one can recover one's own place; in his own words, it is to "make Latin America's past come alive so we can gain some control over our future" ("Interview"). If there is one truth that *The Sound of Things Falling* shows, it is that reality emerges only when it is assiduously challenged: it is not a thing out there, but rather a process. Although Antonio's act of becoming conscious has not yet turned into practice, the significance of the moment of recognition enables us to imagine a new reality where he can truthfully take residence. Vasquez finds realism essential in Latin American literature because it offers the best approach to the wreck of the Latin American past.

## IV. Between the Core and the Periphery:

## Semi-peripheral Neo-Realist Cinema and Ethics after Modernism

> Each image is beautiful not because it is beautiful in itself . . .
> but because it is the splendor of the true. (Jean-Luc Godard)[24]

### IV.1. The Nation In-Between and the Dilemma of Semi-peripheral Aesthetics

Since the 1990s, the global awareness of the unequal literary system was intensified with the efforts of western intellectuals, who tried to provide a more inclusive framework to remake world literature after the task of, in the Warwick Research Collective's words, "'unthinking' Eurocentrism" (5). South Korea has fervently participated in the world literature debates, though its critics have received less attention in the world forums devoted to this issue than they should. For South Korea, a country precariously positioned between the core and the periphery with particular political, economic, and cultural contradictions—its regressive democracy, widening gap between the rich and the poor despite the relative wealth of the country, and both economic and cultural dependency on the core countries—imagining the place of its aesthetics in the world republic of letters came as an urgent issue that would make South Korea visible not for its world-historical scar as a tragically divided country but for its rich aesthetic and cultural assets.

The work of Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch, among others, reached the country at precisely the moment when researchers started seeking to mediate the national peculiarity of South Korean politico-aesthetics and the universality of world literature. In her seminal work, *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), Casanova,

[24] Quoted in Peter Brunette, 206-207. Originally appeared in *Cahier du Cinema* 96 (1959).

relying on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a "field," defines the literary field as a world of rivalry, consistent competition, and inequality, "a world that has its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power" (4). According to her, in this literary world governed by unequal power relations, each writer struggles for recognition, and "rival languages compete for dominance" (4). By making a further argument that the rivalries have created world literature, where the "literary Greenwich meridian" (87) is a standard set of criteria on which literary values are based, she has provided a useful framework for rethinking world literature in terms of its symbolic capital in the literary world system.

Together with Franco Moretti's attempts to position debates of world literature in the discursive context of the modern capitalist world-system, Casanova's insight into the workings of linguistic and literary power relations in the literary battle for authority—where will be the main place of consecration after Paris?—has inspired many critics of non-Anglophone Third World countries, in particular. Due to the features of their languages that make them difficult to translate and thus less approachable, their entrance to the field of world literature is somewhat held back. In that situation, her emphasis on the significance of the periphery as an advantageous place to gain better sight of literary power relations—evoking the critical potentials of peripheral perspectives created in the uneven process of modernity—particularly invigorated them.

> The irremediable and violent discontinuity between the metropolitan literary world and its suburban outskirts is perceptible only to writers on the periphery, who, having to struggle in very tangible ways in order

> simply to find "the gateway to the present" (as Octavio Paz put it), and then to gain admission to its central precincts, are more clearsighted than others about the nature and the form of the literary balance of power. (Casanova 43)

It did not take long, however, for her seemingly liberating prioritization of literary space to alienate Korean critics and audiences. Despite declaring, in the preface of the book, the imprudence of the attempt to "geographically enlarge the corpus of works . . . to provide an impossibly exhaustive enumeration of the whole of world literary production," and demanding instead that critics "change our ordinary way of looking at literary production" (xi), they doubted that her project could be radical enough to reframe world literature. Even as she resisted Eurocentric approaches to geographic relations, she maintained some Eurocentrism in her understanding of aesthetic form. Ji-kwan Yoon in his article "Does World Literature Have a Foreign Office?" (2011), with a title identical to Fredric Jameson's keynote speech at 2008 Holberg Prize Symposium and written under its influence, clarifies the (semi-)peripheral discomfort about the work of Moretti and Casanova:

> It becomes clear from his [Moretti's] almost arbitrary list of the "Modern Epic" constructed around the great western works of literature that his reading of the history of literature is still caught up within the literary influence of the Western canon. His focus lies in how the contradictions of modernity engendered the explosion of modernism and how it was reflective of the stubbornness of the world-system. And he is rather blind

> to the phenomenon that the encounter between the modern forms and the concrete realities of the Third-World has made remarkably creative achievements not just through modernism but through a renewal of realism in the periphery of the world-system. (50-51, my translation)
>
> The literary revolution that Casanova speaks of, however, is against the grain of the peripheral awareness of the problematics of Third World literature. . . . If the Third World perspective suggests an understanding of the world as a whole without alienating a national viewpoint, Casanova's peripheral perspective lacks a recognition of the peripheral source of change, including the concrete realities of the periphery and actual movements to alter the realities. Rather, what constitutes the core of Casanova's innovation is to expunge its political origin. One can almost say that it is *modernism* that Casanova has set as twentieth-century literature's Greenwich meridian. (52, my translation, emphasis added)

Taking the example of Sang-Seop Yom's *Three Generations* (1931) and its achievements in realism, enabled by the complex situation of the feudalistic and colonial system's encounter with the modern world, Yoon argues that it is not just narrowly defined modernism, but the resourceful heritage of realism that has been renewed through its restless confrontation with modernity and that has inspired and enriched the peripheral literary space (53). The relative marginalization of realism not just in the Western academy but also in the field of world literature is a significant issue, Yoon implies,

which has tended to alienate the kinds of literature shaped by realistic forms and visions specific to the national particularity of its origin.

Korean aesthetics' historically incessant indulgence in the potential of realism in literature and cinema, in this sense, is a double-edged sword; while it hinders Korean literature and cinema from gaining admission to the international art world, it secures a sort of aesthetic particularity specific to the region, which might add radically dissimilar insight to the discourse of, in Yoon's words, "how to innovate the existing unimodal structure of world literature" (58, my translation). If the country tried to overcome the aesthetic distance from the core by choosing to pursue its desire to be recognized and prove the peripheral ability to catch up with the sophisticated western aesthetics, the promotion of the semi-peripheral realism might not be effective as it lacks dramatic or spectacular scenes to exhibit, shown in other Third-World literature or cinema, like Iranian realist films; that is, Korean aesthetic is not Third-wordly enough for the western audience. The recent revival of realism in Korean literature, cinema, and even TV series seems to attest to the high level of fatigue that Koreans have felt in the struggle for recognition. Despite the fruitful achievements that the western modernist aesthetic has brought out to the realms of the Korean academy and popular art with its revolutionary advancement in the expression of the fundamental human alienation in modernity—which is best exemplified in the work of Yi Sang (1910-1937), *The Wings* (*Nalgae*, 1936), in particular—the unhealthy, defeatist feeling of despair and "its deep-rooted anxiety and disbelief about life" (53) in Hong-soo Jung's words, was something to overcome for Korean arts, since their task had been historically inseparable from the

long-term, grand political project for human freedom. The emergence of neo-realism in Korean art and its attendant discourses should be thought of, in this respect, as a result of the critical reflection upon the idea of the universality of modernism and its alleged potentials, and people's shared understanding that historically dissimilar experiences of the periphery necessitate a different kind of politico-aesthetics than the imported form of modernism. In this sense, Roberto Schwarz's description of "half-baked" (65) literature—in "The Importing of the Novel to Brazil and its Contradictions in the Work of Alencar," he argues that western influence on 19th-century Brazilian literature contradicted the actual reality of Brazil—applies to the current situation of South Korean art as well. The liberating ideas imbued by western modernism, say, the unrestricted liberation of individual subjectivity, and a further possibility of the subjective energies to construct a radical (non-)community as an alternative to the so-called repressive power of the nation-state have temporarily veiled the scars left by the historically unresolved contradictions of South Korean social reality. But the festering wounds that have come to the fore in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as the forms of regressive democracy and deteriorating social equality seem to have led to the South Korean people's realization of the need for arts of their own: that is, new forms of art that unambiguously communicate the social realities in a country where up to 40 of its people choose to take their own lives every day.[25]

It is significant that realism has been resummoned in this context as Korean artists have decided to choose the already familiar but not obsolete tactics of realism and

[25] South Korea has had the highest suicide rates in the industrialized world for the past eleven years, and the second highest in the whole world behind Guyana.

resharpen its criticality. Realism has always been an aesthetic mode for the breakthrough of historically important political crises in Korea—the colonization of the country by Japan (1910-1945), its division by Western powers into the opposed states of North and South Korea (1948), the Korean war that ravaged the peninsula (1950-1953), and the social oppression that persisted in the post-war era and the decades of military rule (1961-1993). The recent revival of realism as an aesthetic form of crisis in the literary and cinematic scenes is exemplified by the reactivation of the reportage genre (Ji-a Jung and Nam-il Kim, among others), the poetic and novelistic neo-realism (Eun-young Jin, Joong-il Kim, and Hong-kyu Son), and the filmic eruptions of the attempts to unseal the pains of the violent past, still ruling over the present moment, and visualize the weight of historical truth (Chang-dong Lee, Woo-seok Yang, and Ji-young Boo). In the "shadow of almost disabled historical consciousness," in Jong-won Song's words, these witnesses to the South Korean reality are either voluntarily "walking into the place of both discomfort and trepidation only to be introduced to the place of collective subjectivity, transcending the 'I' in the fragmented world" or "spreading out the seed of history" onto the soil of art "to rethink the world" (Song 281). The astonishing popularity of the TV series, *Misaeng* (*Incomplete Life*, 2014) and the widespread social impacts of *Songkot* (*Awl*, 2015) evince the people's strengthened desire to "understand" the world beyond its unknowability. In a rather serious manner for television dramas, both reexamine the cruel workings of the current economic system from which no one is supposed to benefit but a handful of capitalists. In a recent interview entitled "Writers' Encounter with Reality," by the Changbi Publishers on the return of the real in the aesthetic scene of South Korea, Ji-a

Jung, a Korean neo-realist writer, pointed out the changed role of the Korean general public as the most distinguished difference in this newly emerging realism from the 1970s-1980s realist movement (286); if the Korean intelligentsia, as the spearhead of the movement, led *Minjung* (literally "the subjects of history," but are oppressed and exploited) to realize the brutal truth hidden behind the dictatorial government's reality-distortion (whose sometimes propagandistic practices dissociated them from their own literary tasks), the current neo-realism has emerged by the voluntary demands of people hungering for arts that touch on the sufferings of their hard times. That is, a request for art as a witness to their pains has driven the neo-realist movement towards a different kind of politico-aesthetics that does not fundamentally dismiss the artistic achievements of modernist innovation but overcomes the general lack of perspective in it.

The emergent Korean neo-realism is mediated by the consciousness that an ethics which is not based on our fierce struggle to encounter reality ultimately leads to the self-sufficient, fugitive feeling of individual freedom; it does situate one in a disagreeable position letting us face the agony of others, but the ironically pleasant feeling of alienation in a dismal world, enjoyed more often than not by a small number of cultural elites in the country, does not always amount to the realization that it is necessary or possible to break through the reactionary state; it almost gives one a feeling that it is fine and even beautiful to withdraw into the state of alienation, and into meaninglessness, nothingness, and impotence, which is rooted in the ongoing national unconsciousness of the unalterable reality. Korean neo-realism is vigilant against this kind of cynical narcissism; the world that the neo-realist attempts to picture is utterly painful to watch,

not because fictional characters in the world have such horrendous lives dissimilar to ours but because of the very affinity of their world with our own. The alienation that the audience feels in the work is unbearably hurtful and they ultimately find "alienation" itself a dolorous state from which they want to escape. The South Korean neo-realists, in this sense, seem to push their aesthetics forward against the Kantian concept of transcendental beauty; rather, they renew Godard's insight that the beautiful comes out of the truthful, trying to show how beauty becomes real only when its form is revealed as "innate development of the concrete content itself" (Hegel 35), and how it requires a series of labors that engage us in the dynamic encounter with existing things, the painful analysis of the things, and the ultimate negation of our thinking of the things to obtain what we might call the reality of the truth.

### IV.2. South Korean Neo-Realist Cinema and Chang-Dong Lee's *Poetry*

One of the aesthetic attempts that exemplifies the aforementioned characteristics of Korean neo-realism is Chang-dong Lee's film, *Poetry* (2010). Beginning his career as a realist novelist, Lee took a detour as a director in 1997 with his first film *Green Fish* and kept refining a cinematic realism of his own through various filmic experimentations in *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *Oasis* (2002), and *Secret Sunshine* (2007). His fidelity to the aesthetic and ethical potential of realism has been unswerving even when the directors of the so-called Post Korean New Wave in the mid-1990s, including Chan-wook Park, Ki-duk Kim, and Sang-soo Hong, were successfully introduced to the international art world, due in part to their films' cosmopolitan vision, formed by their

education in the most globalized cities—Paris for Kim, San Francisco and Chicago for Hong. While the internationally acclaimed master directors replaced the traditionally held Korean ethic that "the most Korean is the most international" with "the most international is the most international," Lee's relative aloofness from the tumultuous debates on how to make Korean film internationally more recognizable and his intense focus on incessant sophistication of his realist practice instead led to the most evolved form of Korean realism in *Poetry*.

If he, in the genre of noir, tries to show the history of Korean urban modernity to tackle the issue of alienation itself in *Green Fish* and depicts social neglect and discrimination through the appropriation of traditional melodrama in *Oasis*,[26] Lee seems to free himself from the frame of any cinematic genre in *Poetry* to concentrate on the inquiry into what art is. His digging into the issues of loss and forgiveness thematized in both *Peppermint Candy* and *Secret Sunshine* continues in *Poetry* as well, but this time Lee is hopeful enough to go beyond a desiring subject's constant failure as in *Peppermint Candy* or the "unresolvable aporias about forgiveness" (Chow 111) as in *Secret Sunshine*.[27] As always, Lee, as a storyteller, intervenes actively in the film to direct the experience of the audience according to the perspective that he has already set. He regards cinema as an aesthetic device through which the author, as an ethical subject, should impose the task of thinking upon the audience; "some audiences complain that my

[26] See Chapter 6. "Virtual Trauma," in Kyung-Hyun Kim's *Virtual Hallyu* for a detailed discussion of Lee's use of the uncanny in *Oasis* to emphasize its melodramatic effect.

[27] See Chapter 5. "I insist on the Christian dimension" in Rey Chow's *Entanglements* for a discussion of how Lee thematizes aporias about forgiveness in *Secret Sunshine* by stripping forgiveness "of its supposedly absolute status and finality . . . and (re)inserting forgiveness in the circuit of social exchange" (112). For an analysis of *Peppermint Candy*, especially regarding how its reverse chronology functions to challenge the idea of national identity, see Todd McGowan's "Affirmation of the Lost Object: *Peppermint Candy* and the End of Progress" (2007).

films are so tightly knit together and intentional that there is no place for them to escape. I admit this is true, but I don't think it's something I should avoid. If a film is to capture an audience, then having no way of escape is a virtue" (qtd. in Young-jin Kim, 66). Lee's exploration of the *raison d'etre* of art in the film unfolds around two motifs that are intricately intertwined: the main character Mi-ja's alternative way to respond to the small town's gang rape case, and her desire to write poetry. Mi-ja is taking care of her grandson, Jong-Wook, while her divorced daughter lives in a city nearby, and she now has to face the cruel fact that Wook is involved in the gang rape case. Poor, ill (she is diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer's disease), and alienated from people due in part to her transcendent and somewhat weird attitude toward life, Mi-ja appears to have lost touch with reality in some ways and to dwell in her own world of beauty, but she is passionate enough about art to join a poetry class at a local community center and attend a weekly poetry reading too. While the parents of the boy perpetrators try to resolve the case by paying a settlement of 30 million won to the victim's poor widowed mother, Mi-ja chooses to give her ill-mannered grandson several chances to atone for his sin, but he keeps refusing to confront his crime. Her pursuit of a righteous way to mourn the death of the young girl coincides with her effort to complete the poetry class assignment to write one poem by the end of the month-long course.

Throughout the film, Mi-ja struggles with her inability to write a poem despite her enormous sensibility, and the director unambiguously reveals that he is invested in portraying Mi-ja's voyage to the moment when she is finally able to write a poem. In this sense, the film is almost a bildungsroman of a 66-year-old female, Mi-ja, who comes to

understand what it means to write poetry and, further, what art has to do with her weary life. Mi-ja's initial belief that writing poetry is all about discovering "true beauty" is slightly but intentionally revised by a series of intrusive moments of her reality; or, her conceptualization of "true beauty" goes though some inevitable alterations as she realizes that completing her poetry assignment cannot be separated from her dealing with Wook's rape case. In the scene in which she is summoned to meet with the parents of other boy perpetrators at a local restaurant for the first time, Mi-ja, though shocked by the briefing of the parents and ashamed of Wook's involvement with the crime, leaves the room in the middle of their conversation to feel flowers in the yard of the restaurant, of cockscomb, in particular. To Ki-bum's father, one of the parents in the meeting who comes out to bring her back into the room to discuss a settlement money for Hee-jin's mother, Mi-ja says that the cockscomb flower symbolizes a "shield." Shielded from the beauty of the flower "as red as blood," Mi-ja steps back from the case to be immersed in her attempt to solve the enigma of "seeing well" that the instructor of her poetry class, Yong-tak Kim, emphasized as the most significant ability to have in order to able to write poetry:

> Instructor: Writing poetry. It's about discovering true beauty in everything we see in front of us in our everyday life. True beauty, not things just looking beautiful. Every single one of you carries poetry in your heart. But you've imprisoned it, and it's time to free your poetry. The poetry trapped inside you must be given wings to take flight.
>
> Mi-ja: When does poetic inspiration come?

> Instructor: It doesn't. You must go and beg for it. It is somewhere nearby, not far away.

Wook's involvement with the hideous crime becomes a catalyst for Mi-ja to move from seeing "things just looking beautiful" to "true beauty," but at the first stage of avoidance, she tries to dodge facing the ugliness of her grandson's crime as if "seeing" the case directly taints her endeavor to seek for the purest form of beauty. Her failed understanding of the instructor's focus on "seeing" leads to several ludicrous moments when she takes the literal meaning of "seeing" from the instructor's lesson that, "You haven't seen an apple for real. To really know what an apple is, to be interested in it, to understand it, to converse with it, is really seeing it," and peers at natural objects around her, sky, trees, and apples. She is still passively waiting for poetic inspiration to come visit her at this point, not "go[ing] and beg[ging] for it," as the instructor advises. As if beauty could not be associated with human affairs, she clings to the aesthetic objects of the non-human, the glowing splendor of nature, and the red glamour of flowers. As her always overly chic outfit, which Ki-bum's father finds too outlandish for the neighborhood, operates as a defense mechanism for her not to "see" her poverty, she hides herself behind the beauty of nature, a safe shield from the truth of her reality to which she is reluctant to step forward.

Mi-ja is voluntarily trapped in her own fantasy, and is hesitant to get out of it until she becomes serious about writing poetry. Unable to prepare the settlement money of five million won on her part, she is urged by Ki-bum's father to tell her divorced daughter, who lives alone in Busan for work, about both the case and Wook's involvement with it.

Despite her confident remark that she and her daughter are “good friends,” and “talk about everything on the phone,” she cannot tell her daughter about Wook’s crime. She understands that fantasy keeps them safe from the pain of torturous life and seems to argue that it is one little thing that she deserves to have; it is too much to demand that she and her daughter face the brutality of the ugly truth. At this point, the need to recognize and face her reality becomes a matter of life and death.

With passion for beauty and integrity at heart as her name symbolizes (Korean and Japanese language share logographic Chinese characters, and “Mi-ja” (美子) means a person of beauty)—she is a person with principles and ethics enough to quit her part-time maid job right way when the elderly stroke victim that she has cared for makes a desperate sexual request—Mi-ja cannot just close her eyes and ignore the voice of her conscience. And at the Catholic mass to mourn the death of Agnes (Hee-jin’s baptismal name), Mi-ja, who sneaked into the mass to join the condolence ceremony, experiences the macabre power of “seeing” and “being seen” for the first time when she is exposed to the accusing gaze of a few of Hee-jin’s friends. Unable to stand their truth-piercing gaze, Mi-ja hurriedly runs out of the place, taking with her a framed picture of Hee-jin put on the entrance of the church for the mass. When she decides to take her involvement with the tragedy seriously, there is no room for sympathy of the kind Mi-ja felt when she as a passerby saw Hee-jin’s mother crazy with grief at her daughter’s death in the first scene of the film. As Mi-ja slowly begins to accept the death of Hee-jin as something she is fully responsible for, her invitation to bring Hee-jin back into her life progresses, and the director carefully but willfully portrays how the process coincides with Mi-ja’s endeavor

to complete the assignment to write a poem. Mi-ja is still naïve at this moment and cannot recognize the link between the two, and thus approaches the two tasks separately. She starts to feel uncomfortable, however, with the parents group's easy attempt to bury the case for the safe future of their sons, letting the existence of Hee-jin itself be forgotten forever. Mi-ja, rather, thinks the miserable death of Hee-jin deserves to have a meaning, and without knowing how, she tries to track the traces of Hee-jin when she was still alive. She visits the school Hee-jin attended, and peeks into the science lab where she heard that the boy perpetrators used to rape her. And a few days later, when she visits the bridge from which Hee-jin jumped, the audience witnesses Mi-ja step out of her passive stages of complete avoidance and then painful sadness due to her grandson's involvement with the case, and enter the level of active mourning of the victim.

Poetry, meanwhile, remains her place of escape from her guilty conscience, but the film is cruel to show that Mi-ja's inability to write a poem is derived from the very ignorance of the relation between true beauty that she longs for and her wretched life, the gruesomeness of her reality. The way she realizes the link corresponds to the process in which Mi-ja's conception of poetry is corrected by a series of intrusive moments of the real that disrupts her own fantasy world of beauty. To her absurd infatuation with the beauty of red camellias at the doctor's room in a hospital in Seoul where she is diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer's disease, the doctor, after explaining the future seriousness of her disease, responds by saying "those [flowers] are fake." On the bridge that she visits to feel Hee-jin's last day of life, Mi-ja's hat is blown off by the wind, and she smiles, enjoying the momentary sense of freedom enabled by the nature that she loves. Within

seconds, however, she is brought back to reality by the flying hat slowly coming down to float on the river that Hee-jin jumped into, reminding the audience of the image of Hee-jin's corpse in the first scene of the film. Mi-ja wants to dwell in the moment of natural beauty and takes her notebook out of her purse to record her feelings, but the sudden shower hinders her from writing. The full camera shot with a close-up of the image of the raindrops on the notebook seems to convey the purest moment of the film, but before the audience can be taken up by the Kantian moment of disinterested beauty, the director taints its purity by evoking the image of Hee-jin's tears that she might have shed on her last day. The enigmatic scene of the raindrops, unnecessarily long and beautiful at first sight, led some Korean film critics to argue that it reveals the moment of Lee's inevitable fascination with the aesthetic disinterestedness of beauty despite his conscious faith in art's inseparableness from life and its further responsibility to be engaged. Si-hwan Ahn, for instance, in "Aesthetic Desire and Moral Obligation in Chang-dong Lee's Poetry" in *Cine 21*, discusses the rupture between the film's moral content and its form's occasional betrayal, taking the raindrop scene as the most vivid example of showing Lee's unconscious attraction to the beauty of objects itself. His argument leads to the following conclusion:

> This rupture seems to have happened because Lee is a director, that is, a human being who, from the first, cannot help being attracted to the beauty of objects. By which I am arguing that Lee is unconsciously attracted to the disinterred beauty, and Lee's attempt to turn his back towards the morality of art can be understood as his conscious act of resistance to his

> unconscious desire. We don't know how persistent it would be, but it is clear that he is fighting to death at least in *Poetry*. (my translation)

Ahn's argument disregards the core fact that no scene in Lee's films is unintentional; as Lee himself is aware of the audience's complaint that his films are "so tightly knit together and intentional," he is notorious for allowing little room for contingency in his work. In a sense, one can almost say that Lee is close to a Lukácsian artist, since he organizes his films so that they consistently resist what Lukács calls in "The Ideology of Modernism" that "perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory-data, their powerfully charged, but aimless and directionless, fields of force" that represents "the non-dialectical view of form and intention" (18). Lee is not shy about maintaining faith in the potential of what Lukács calls "perspective," a sense of direction, without which art cannot formulate the question of totality and get to the core of reality. It is more plausible to see the scene of raindrops, in this regard, as one that symbolizes Mi-ja's failure to write due to the intrusion of the brutal real, not as the moment of Lee's transient intoxication with the transcendent beauty of nature; before she could even write a letter, the sudden raindrops resembling Hee-jin's tears write poetry on Mi-ja's white, canvas-like notebook. The picturesque poetry written with the raindrops comes almost as an imperative that poetry can only be written, and should be written, with Hee-jin's bloody tears; the association of the image of Hee-jin and the "red" color is everywhere in the film. It starts as Mi-ja's color that she says symbolizes "pain," and it soon becomes Hee-jin's as Mi-ja's becoming Hee-jin gets clearer as the story progresses. It corresponds to the scene in the beginning of the film, in which the title "시" (poetry), handwritten by the

director himself, appears next to the corpse of the dead girl, as if trying to say "poetry should be lain right next to the dead" (my translation), as Myung-ho Lee rightly points out. The moment prompts Mi-ja to experience the tragedy of Hee-jin by becoming her, and Mi-ja, fully soaked in the shower, heads from the bridge to the place of the elderly man of whom she has taken care to accept his sexual demand. Her face does not show any hint of emotion during the act, as if Hee-jin's face might have looked the same on one of the days when she was repetitively raped by the boys in the science lab.

As Mi-ja's own world of beauty is slowly violated by the interfering moments of the real, her understanding of poetry begins to be altered as well. She feels insulted by a member of the weekly poetry reading group, Sang-tae Park, who always follows his reading of beautiful poetry with cheesy sexual jokes, but hears from an amateur poet in the group that he is a policemen with a good heart who was recently assigned from Seoul for being a whistle-blower, who fought against injustice within the police force. Mi-ja, experiencing the gap between Park's ugly form of language and his pure heart, realizes for the first time that "to love poetry," which she has equated with "to seek the purest form of the beautiful," has more meanings, and beauty is not a matter of securing a spotless form, forged out of Mi-ja's life full of pollution. By making Park, a person of tough comportment, the only character with enough sympathy to notice the crying Mi-ja crouched at a secluded spot outside the poetry group's after-party and then an important participant in Mi-ja's accusation against Wook, the director insists on the co-existence of justice with beauty. It is significant that Park, who seems to be the most distant person from what poetry could ever signify, is one of the regulars in the weekly poetry reading.

When the ignorant Park consoles Mi-ja, who is crying alone after encountering Hee-jin's mother, and asks her, "Why are you crying, big sister? Is something wrong? Is it because of poetry? Since you can't write any?" his absurd question, unintentionally positing Mi-ja's inability to write poetry in parallel with her sense of guiltiness in the minds of the audience, affirms the very truth that Mi-ja has just realized. It is not until Mi-ja is forced by the other parents of the boys to meet Hee-jin's mother to ask her to accept the settlement and to come across her working in the field that Mi-ja is finally awakened in the film to realize that only the dead Hee-jin can complete her poetry assignment. The framed photo of Hee-jin's face together with red flowers—the object of Mi-ja's life-time adoration—which she discovers at the empty house of Hee-jin's mother, is seen in a full shot when the camera stops at it for a few seconds, as if saying her face with flowers deserves to meet our serious gaze. Koreans might find it disturbing to look at Hee-jin's face that resembles the beauty of the red flowers due to its evocation of the title of Chi-hwan Ahn's *Minjung-Gayo*—revolutionary songs of *Minjung*, resounded during South Korea's democracy movement in the 1980s and 1990s—"People are more beautiful than flowers." Her moment of awakening occurs later, though, when Mi-ja, walking out to the field searching for Hee-jin's mother, ends up raving about the beauty of the nature surrounding her—the weather, flowers, trees, and apricots—not realizing that the woman she is talking to is actually Hee-jin's mother. The film is ambiguous about whether her forgetting about the task of meeting Hee-jin's mother is due to the ongoing progress of her Alzheimer's disease or just to her enchantment with the romantic feelings aroused while walking in the country and the excitement for the truth about apricots that she has

just discovered. When she jots down her poetic impression about the apricot fallen to the ground, “the apricot throws itself to the ground. It is crushed and trampled for its next life,” she is still in the world of oblivion, but is slowly driven down by the words of Hee-jin’s mother, who is standing firmly with her feet on the ground:

Mi-ja: Hello. Isn’t the weather nice?

Hee-jin’s mom: Yes, the weather is being helpful.

Mi-ja: This place is quite nice. The scenery is so beautiful. It makes me want to live here.

Hee-jin’s mom: It’s not an easy place to live, though.

Mi-ja: I found an apricot on my way here. Many have fallen to the ground. I took a bite, and it tasted quite good.

Hee-jin’s mom: Fallen apricots taste better. The ones still on trees are too tart to eat.

Mi-ja: Yes, you’re right. It tasted good. When I saw the apricots on the ground, I thought they were full of yearning. Throwing themselves to the ground, being crushed and trampled on, they prepare for their next life. For the first time I realized this about apricots. There were also garden zinnias, growing near the apricot trees. And how pretty they fall to the ground. I felt so blessed to walk in such beauty. I love flowers so much, I get happy just to see them. Gazing flowers makes me feel full. So I don’t even need to eat.

Hee-jin's mom: (smiling) You must like flowers 'cause you're a pretty person.

To Mi-ja, who falls into raptures over the scenery where she has just joined, Hee-jin's mom says that the weather is "helpful," and the seemingly peaceful country is actually not an "easy" place to live. To Mi-ja's excitement at discovering tasty fallen apricots, she responds by providing practical knowledge about apricots out of her experience as a life-time farmer that "fallen apricots taste better. The ones still on trees are too tart to eat," she says, in a kind but nonchalant manner at the same time. Although the language of Hee-jin's mom is simple and dry, when she speaks of "fallen apricots tast[ing] better," one feels that the expression means much more than the mere fact about fallen apricots; Hee-jin's mom does not mean it metaphorically, but one already begins to feel the poetic potential of the down-to-earth but truthful expression. She does not have time and energy to mean it metaphorically when the taste of crops and fruits is, for her, as a farmer, an issue of whether she would be able to survive another year. When she asserts the empirical truth based on what her robust and intense life has taught her, contrasted with Mi-ja's affective romanticism, however, it invites us to figure out the various levels of mediation that the empirical truth of the apricots has gone through. It becomes a poet's task now, Mi-ja's responsibility that she has not yet realized, to disentangle the ways in which things at our sight get complicated as they have gone through the multiple levels of mediation, to discover the truth. Like the tasty fallen apricots, Mi-ja also needs to touch the human ground. Mi-ja is still at the surface level, however, and their conversation keeps hovering around a point that they feel they are discussing, while they talk about the

same topic, namely, the truth of the fallen apricot. But Mi-ja is soon driven by the language of Hee-jin's mom to pull her down to earth from Mi-ja's high world of transcendent beauty, and realize that she is too wrapped up in her own way of viewing the apricots. After a brief talk about the challenge of farming, Mi-ja says good bye to her but soon shudders at the thought that the woman was actually Hee-jin's mother. She hurriedly escapes from the place, enthralled by the feelings of embarrassment and guiltiness.

The crucial moment of her awkward encounter with Hee-jin's mother serves as a catalyst for Mi-ja to realize the necessity to resist her desire to "drink a glass of oblivion," like the lyrics of the song that she sang waiting for Ki-bum's father at the karaoke that he owns. The hospital scene implies that Mi-ja, who is currently oblivious to nouns, will be close to death when she starts forgetting verbs, implying that her oblivion corresponds to her non-being. Likewise, her official meeting with Hee-jin's mother prepared by the other parents of the boys to reach a settlement in one of the parents' real estate office functions as a push to lead Mi-ja to move from the level of mere realization to the one of actualization. Mi-ja finds herself barely able to face the gaze of Hee-jin's mother, full of dismay and resentment, when she discovers that the woman she had the light conversation with in the field was actually one of the family members involved. She hurriedly gets out of the meeting, but when the eyes of Mi-ja keep tracing the face of Hee-jin's mom beyond the window of the real estate office, one senses that Mi-ja must change in order to be true to the description of Hee-jin's mother of her as a "pretty" person, and thereby to be faithful to what her name means. In the ensuing scenes of the

film, it is implied that Mi-ja, at the last moment when the case is about to be closed with the other parents' deal with Hee-jin's mother along with the school and the press, officially accuses her grandson, exposing the crime of the boys to the world. She has already prepared five million won, the settlement money on her part to give Hee-jin's mother as well, as if she realized that the parent of the victim deserved to have more than apologies and compassion; Mi-ja almost threatens the elderly man to give the money in return for her keeping the secret of their sexual encounter from his family. When the policeman who came along with Sang-tae Park takes Wook with him to his car while Mi-ja tries to take the shuttlecock hung on the tree down to the ground to continue to play badminton with Wook, the audience finds the director's portrayal of the crucial scene significantly composed.

As if the event belonged to the ordinary, Mi-ja is not flappable about Wook's leaving, and Park replaces Wook to continue the game. The possible dramatic effect that the scene might have brought out is restrained to the extreme as the director tries to lead the audience to concentrate on the power of the narrative, intensified by Mi-ja's determined act of changing the course of how the incident is concluded. No background music is used throughout the film for the same reason; as seen in Lee's confession in an interview with the film critic, Dong-jin Lee, "Chang-dong Lee's Poetry: On Beauty," that he thought the sound of the river that Hee-jin jumped into should suffice, and made a final decision to remove all the background music used in the film, he is vigilant against the superfluous arousal of emotion that might misdirect the audience from focusing directly on Mi-ja's conscious act itself.

It is significant that Mi-ja is only able to write a poem, "Agnes's Song," after she finally gets to understand that the two tasks, taking Hee-jin's death as her own responsibility and completing the assignment for the poetry class, are inseparable. When the poet-instructor finds Mi-ja's poem lain on his desk with a bouquet of flowers and responds to the other participants who did not complete the assignment, "It is not difficult to write a poem. It is difficult to have the heart to write one," one realizes that Mi-ja, though gone, left her heart in the poem, letting the poem eternally materialize her mind. Her mourning is completed as "Agnes's Song," and when it begins to be read by the instructor to the class and then through Mi-ja's voice, the camera that has now become Mi-ja's eyes, records Mi-ja's final day; from the trees and children playing in the neighborhood where Mi-ja used to enjoy watching, it moves to the bus stop, and to the ground of Hee-jin's school. When the eyes and voice of Hee-jin take over from here and trace the science lab where she was raped, to the bus, and to the bridge where she ended her life, it is willfully ambiguous about whether what we witnesses is the last day of Hee-jin's life or Mi-ja's. We realize soon, however, the question becomes unimportant, when we, ruminating over the difference between the poem as recited though the voice of Mi-ja and then that of Hee-jin, find ourselves dismayed by the only irrealistic moment of the film: Hee-jin approaches the tip of the bridge, turns around to see us, smiling. As if daring us to endure her smiling face, the director thrusts the disruptive moment into the film, with no anxiety about its possibility to dismantle the coherence of the genre. Rather, the power of the narrative of the film almost deprives us of the confidence to argue that it is unreal, as the seemingly heterogeneous scene of the film completes Lee's realism; his

fidelity to the truth of reality requires him to resummon dead Hee-jin. It becomes clearer at this point that the real, for Lee, is not just what it looks like before us—it is not waiting for us to be mimicked—but something that must be sought for laboriously, and "discovered," using Jameson's word—it is already present there, but it is not present in its truthful sense until it is re-presented. That is, Lee's practice of realism is close to an act of discovering the hidden real below the empirical surface; it is also a manifesto that the act does not require a heroic behavior, but starts with a good sense of the relation of the ordinary to the eventful, the individual to the collective, and the poetic to the political. Timothy Brennan, in his speech "Homiletic Realism," has defined realism as "an act of recognizing one's own being." The cinematic realism of *Poetry*, then, shows how the act of recognizing one's own being can be accomplished through its mediation by an act of recognizing the being of others as a requirement; only at the moment when Hee-jin is summoned in Mi-ja's poetry can Mi-ja finally recognize herself and be truthful to the meaning of her name. It is the moment when her name, language, truly comprises her being—the moment when its content and form become finally identical.

For Lee, cinema is an aesthetic medium through which the audience re-experiences their ordinary lives, the space to which the truth belongs, as he elucidates in the interview "On Beauty": "it is a story of everyone, not of a particular person with a particular background." He makes clear that the seemingly unique conflicts that Mi-ja faces in the film are derived from the complicatedly intertwined social problems of Korean society, in general—the logic of capital that infiltrates the everyday lives of the people, the unequal benefit of the modernization of Korean cities and its resultant

alienation of suburban areas, and among others, dark pessimism that has slowly swamped the society in the meantime. Cautiously designed realistic references in the film might only serve the Korean audience—that the film is based on a true gang rape incident by reckless teenagers in a small town of the country; that the person who acts the instructor of the poetry class at the local community center, Yong-tak Kim, is actually a famous South Korean poet, Yong-taek Kim; that the unjust vice-president of Hee-jin's school was performed by Moon-soon Choi, the governor of Gangwon Province from the Democratic Party; that the actress who leads the film, Jeong-hee Yun's real first name, Mi-ja Son, is identical with the name of the character (although the director says that it was a total coincidence); and finally, the fact that Agnes's song, written by the director himself, was included in a collection of essays dedicated to the deceased former president Moo-Hyun Roh, almost the only democratic president in the history of Korean politics cherished in the heart of people, widely loved across different economic and social classes for his humanistic political philosophy. These references, particular to Korean social reality, are fun to find, but the director aligns them throughout the film so that whether the audience could recognize them or not does not matter much (those are hard to catch even for Koreans, unless they are of careful mind) in approaching the ideas of the film; the way *Poetry* obtains universality is by showing how the particulars of the social reality of South Korea already participate in the constitution of the universal question about the relation between the beautiful and the ethical as an essential element, and the director cautiously designs the film in a way that the universal does not oppress the particular. To the question of "why do we keep trying to write poetry when it seems

to be impossible to write one anymore?" with its Adornian overtone of writing poetry after Auschwitz, Lee provides a simple answer in *Poetry* that beauty can finally mean something when things do not look beautiful any more ("On Beauty"). His sensitivity to the social reality of South Korea in *Poetry* leads the film in a way that assists us to discover the significance of the question of what art is, attesting to the peripheral form's capability of communicating universal ideas without sacrificing the peripheral particularity.

*Poetry* is not optimistic at all, but close to a tragedy. However, the film is hopeful, in Eagleton's sense in *Hope Without Optimism* (2015): true hope is irrefutably tragic, but it has a radical implication for permanent revolution arising from the rigorous understanding of the condition of the present, while optimism is a form of nihilism, uninterested in a call for change. The film does not just posit Mi-ja's absence in the final scene as a sort of sublime sacrifice of one ethical individual with a great cause against the moral corruption of the social community, as Ahn argues, among others, in the aforementioned review of the film. Based on Karatani Kojin's distinction between moral participation and ethical intervention in *Rinri 21* (*倫理21* [*Ethics 21*], 2000), Ahn replays the incurable separation between individuality and community, and interprets Mi-ja's deed as unimaginable if she has not transcended her community. When Ahn makes this argument, he is very much immersed in the corruption of the communities of the parents and school, and leaves the local poetry reading group unconsidered. The director is, of course, not naïve to suggest it as an ultimate alternative to the immoral community; the poetry community is similarly pathetic—the participants sometimes do not seem to know

what they are doing or reading, and their talks in many cases end up falling in unintended ambiguity. A young and rising poet who happens to join the after-party of the group shouts out in drunkenness that "it is a total bullshit to write poetry," and Sang-tae Park is always busy making people laugh with his dirty jokes. In other words, the poetry community is not portrayed as ideal as we want—it would be unrealistic—but there is something heartwarming in their regular gatherings to read and learn poetry; in their own toughest moments of life, they have unstoppable enthusiasm for the truthfulness of poetry and do not stop meeting together to pursue it. It resembles a society of failures but it does influence Mi-ja to move forward. Sang-tae Park, whom she hated at first for his vulgarity, ends up becoming her comrade to help actualize her cautiously planned resistance to the parents' burial of the crime. Community in Lee's film is not treated like a homogeneous concept, as Ahn seems to think; individuals and communities actively affect each other, leaving his audience in the belief that the parents' community will also change as a result of Mi-ja's final action. Lee does not give up on the community for its repeated mistakes; there will be no messianic moment at which an ideally ethical community would emerge out of nothing. *Poetry* suggests that the moment can only be forged out of our collective, laborious work for change; it does not just appear, but should be made.

Mi-ja's death, in this sense, should be thought of not as an attempt to pay for Hee-jin's tragic death with her own life, but her conscious resistance to what prevents her from remembering, and thereby, stops her from coming back to reason. To Mi-ja, whose incipient Alzheimer disease accelerates her forgetfulness, staying still means the embrace of her oblivion. The only way not to forget, ironically, is to end her current life destined

to work toward oblivion. Mi-ja thereby decides to follow the lesson that she learned from the apricots discovered on her way to meeting Hee-jin's mother; like the apricots "throwing themselves to the ground, being crushed and tramped on to prepare for their next life," she decides to have her one and only poem, "Agnes's Song," take over the task of remembering in eternity. To Mi-ja, whose fatigue with the nothingness of being justifies her evasion into the beauty of nature out of her tedious human affairs, poetry gives her an order to resist the forgetfulness, and thereby resist the meaninglessness of life, as the director bluntly says in "On Beauty" that "all poetry is itself a resistance to meaninglessness." *Poetry* suggests that the identification of Mi-ja and Hee-jin at the last moment of the film is beautiful since Mi-ja's action has gained a meaning. Her journey to seek for true beauty finally means something when she moves out of her status of avoidance and actively begs for the truth about Hee-jin's death, and at the end of the journey, she discovers the true beauty by being the beautiful herself. As the instructor of the poetry class has expressed, Mi-ja is able to "free" her poetry "trapped inside her" by giving it "wings to take flight." When she actively asks Hee-jin to put the wings on her heart, Mi-ja finally becomes a poet. And the ethics of Lee's realism ultimately gets substantial when the camera turns toward the place of viewers outside of the screen, in the final scene, from the place of Mi-ja's absence, and asks us to embrace the place as ours, as if it were our place from the first, with an uncomfortable request to respond to Hee-jin's final line: "And I hope to meet you, standing beside me."

*Poetry* is not just an idiosyncratic and lonely work of brilliance among Korean neo-realist cinema but resonates with a larger pattern in contemporary Korean film. As if

trying to understand the intolerable present thorough their journeys to the past, Korean directors have started revisiting the dark chapters of Korean history, including the Japanese colonial era (as in *Assassination* [2015], *Dong-ju: The Portrait of a Poet* [2016], *Spirits' Homecoming* [2016], *The Age of Shadows* [2016], and *Battleship Island* [2017]), the Kwangju Massacre (as in *A Taxi Driver* [2017]), and the June Democratic Uprising (as in *1987* [2017]). At the same time, *Poetry* is also a harbinger of what has not yet been taken up but should have been. As Mi-ja has passed the moment of sympathy to the painful other, the director wants his audience to go beyond compassion, and witness the world of ours where a human act still means something. Lee, in another interview with Hye-ri Lee, "Repetition of the Persistent Storyteller, Chang-dong Lee," affirms this: "Salvation needs to be sought for *here*, not because our reality is beautiful or meaningful, but because a reason for living might arise from the seemingly lacking and shabby reality. . . . As Jong-chan says in *Secret Sunshine* (*Miryang*), 'here is the same as other places'" (my translation, emphasis added). If there is one premise for such a world, South Korean neo-realism suggests, it is that one should be fully prepared to progress from responsible thought to action. And through the cinematic figuration of this emerging ethical program's shared tenet, Lee once again evokes the truth that it is still possible to change the course of an event to affect the world, and that it can occur in the present world, here and now, not in some heavenly world of our imagined utopia.

## V. Deleuze, Affect Theory, and the Future of Realism

Rethinking realism after Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1967) requires a special kind of labor—allegedly, the anachronistic task of recuperating representation as a concept meaningful and even "possible." Noticing the new literary practices of modernist masters such as Mallarmé, Valéry and Proust, Barthes made a declarative argument in his essay that a text "could have no other origin than language itself," thus turning the autonomy of the art object into the autonomy of the text and extending aesthetic autonomy to all of language (146). His idea that searching for an ultimate, single meaning in a text means to impose a limit on that text has provided an exemplary discussion of the proliferating poststructuralist tenet of the arbitrary nature of the sign. And at least in the literary field, it has now become almost commonsensical to discuss the indeterminacy of meaning and interpretation and, further, the ultimate impossibility of language itself, beyond just "the death of the author."

A central line of modernist thought born out of this sort of suspicion about linguistic transparency and the possibility of meaning has revolved around a possibility to ponder an alternative way of capturing modern reality, which seemed to require more vivid and immediate expression. And one notices that what is taking the place of meaning, instead, is affect—a privileged alternative to overcome representation and mediate art and reality in a more direct way (although, technically speaking, it is not even a mediation at all, but functions more like presentation). The affective turn has been advocated by a series of theorists such as Patricia T. Clough, Brian Massumi, and Rei

Terada, whose thought heavily depends upon the liberating nature of affect, as well as the Marxist thinker, Fredric Jameson who has recently engaged with affect in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), along with a tremendous number of research papers utilizing the theories of affect in the academy today. These trends towards affect demonstrate that, with an increasing need to establish a more immediate relation between the subject's lived experience and its meaning in our modern world, affect at least has been affirmed as an important and influential concept to explore.

Affect theories open thought to the distinctively non-linguistic, anti-essentialist, impersonal, and "contingent" traits that inhere in bodily feelings prior to cognition, beyond "the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (Gregg and Seigworth 28). Distinguished from emotions, which still operate within interpretive systems, affects are considered truly autonomous in their capacity to be freed from conscious perception and language, and radically social for their relational—but non-mediational—nature.[28] Indeed, affect's revolutionary forces derive from its fundamental "in-between-ness" (Gregg and Seigworth 1), a body's capacity to affect and to be affected without relying on a pre-established cognitive order, and its indeterminacy opens up a truly new and liberating relationship between the feeling subject and the world. In this sense, affects go beyond aesthetico-philosophical immanence; they engage the social and political field with a (non-)mission to create a new "life." Certain issues arise, however, when affect theory claims political efficacy. Specifically, what I want to explore in this chapter is how the current idea of affect is

[28] See, in particular, Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the Death of the Subject* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 110.

based on a monolithic conception of representation and meaning that leads to a certain degree of self-contradiction in its promotion as a political theory; For affect theory's potential can only be achieved on the premise of either a voluntary abandonment of the supposedly regulative category of agency or of a partial salvation of the already dead subject only by reviving "the subject of sensation."

## Affect, Deleuze and the Problem of Representation

If there is a converging point upon which seemingly diverse and sometimes disparate (though not fundamentally) perspectives on affect can meet, it would be undoubtedly the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Along with Spinoza and Bergson, Deleuze's aesthetic and political philosophy provides a theoretical buttress for many affect theorists to formalize a unique quality of affect—namely, affect as potential. In many cases, it is not even possible to understand the qualities of affect as they are generally expressed in so-called Deleuzian terms that were created or reinvigorated in Deleuze's philosophy—potentiality, intensity, the molecular, affect, the in-compossible, the imperceptible, the rhizome, transcendental immanence, and so on. Deleuze is definitely not the first philosopher who discovered the aesthetic and political powers of affect in the history of philosophy, but he is notably the very one that strengthened the current theoretical movement of the turn to affect, with his unique analysis and appropriation of the Spinozan notion of *adfectus*—which actually means a condition or disposition of the "mind"—and his great investment in modernist aesthetics that affect theorists tend to privilege.

This sort of close philosophical and aesthetic alliance between Deleuze and affect theory or affect theory's repetition and re-appropriation of Deleuzian philosophy makes it necessary to investigate Deleuze's theory of potentiality in examining the political force of affect. As is well-known, Deleuze is a philosopher of dualities, i.e. rhizome/tree, nomadic/sedentary, deterritorial/territorial—and I suggest we include another set of parings to his list: that is, affect/representation, or body/language; actually, if there is one set of binary opposition which keeps operating throughout the whole philosophy of Deleuze, it would be the dualistic set of the unrepresentable versus the representable. And it is not oversimplifying to say that a significant part of the Deleuzian project is to illuminate the oppressive nature of representation, which is maintained, in general, throughout his whole theory and instead look for ways to find what he calls a new "life" as representation can never get us to go beyond what has been already created; the central aim of Deleuze's philosophical masterpiece *Difference and Repetition* (1968) is, arguably, to explain the genesis of representation. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981) and *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993) integrate his aesthetic and literary theory respectively, and can be considered an extension of his aesthetico-political project of what he calls the "creation of new life."

A strict investigation into these works of Deleuze reveals that there is a tenet of what Todd Cronan calls "more like an object, less like a sign" (20) working in Deleuze's dualism of representation and so-called "life." In *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, and Modernism*, Cronan tracks the modernist origin of affect theory and shows how a dominant mode of postmodern theory, including some strains of the currently

popular posthumanist theory, is derived from "a set of failed modernist beliefs" (4). Notably, Deleuze himself reveals in the beginning of *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* his commitment to Valéry's inspiration that "literature is the art of playing the soul of others" (32) which led him to argue that great works of art can create unmediated affective experiences that directly act on the nerves of the receiver. Part of what this statement implies is a continuously and strangely held belief against human consciousness. Despite some of affect theorists' recognition that affect and cognition are never fully separable (Gregg and Seigworth), and Jameson's innocent belief that "the literary representation of affect . . . has as its function to replace the opposition of mind and body" (*Antinomies* 73) there is an ongoing contradiction to affect theory's defense of the unity of the inevitably interrelated mind and body and simultaneous expulsion of the mind. As Danielle Follet rightly points out in her review of Jameson's engagement with affect theory in *The Antinomies of Realism*, the dualism ultimately returns to the body, as is shown in Patricia Clough and Brain Massumi's banishment of consciousness below for its constraining, and "limitative" nature.[29]

> Consciousness is "subtractive" because it reduces a complexity. It is "limitative," a derived function in a virtual field where any actualization becomes, at that same moment of actualization, the limit of that field, which otherwise has no pre-given empirical limit. Affect and

[29] See Danielle Follet, "Is the Cheese Meaningless? The Distension of Dialectics in Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism*," review of *The Antinomies of Realism*, by Fredric Jameson, *Nonsite.org*, March 14, 2014, http://nonsite.org/the-tank/jamesons-the-antinomies-of-realism.

> consciousness are in a virtual-actual circuit, which defines affect as potential and emergent. (Clough 209)

Clough's quote above, written for the purpose of providing a clearer understanding of Massumi's characterization of consciousness as "subtractive" and inhibitive, actually joins with Pierre Klossowski's opposition between what he calls "the wakefulness of consciousness," and the "corporealizing thought" (31) of the body in *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* (1998) that Deleuze actually relies on. Here, Klossowski describes the body as a field with "fluctuations with intensities," of which we are rarely conscious since everyday language "never allows us to speak of our unintelligible depth except by ascribing to what is neither thought, nor said, nor willed a meaning and an aim that we think according to language" (252).

Deleuze's consistent hatred of representation, dialectics, and his opposition to thought almost represents the current academic trends that help to perpetuate the idea that representation per se is "lifeless and senseless" (*Bacon* 146). Although Deleuze tries to distinguish "living usage" of representation from "dead" usage of it in *The Logic of Sense*, pointing out that the former is tied to the conditions of its emergence, he seems to allow no room for representation to be thought otherwise—hence the emphasis on the wise "use" of representation, which can only make it legitimate (146). As Barthes refers to the writer's hands as the cause of the text, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of language refers to the bodies as the cause of language, thereby proclaiming that the text emerges from the body and not mind. How does the affective body become the political subject of

resistance in Deleuze, then? To answer this question, one needs to delve into Deleuze's aesthetic take on Francis Bacon, first of all.

## The Precarious Logic of Pure Affect and Secular Self

In *Francis Bacon*, Deleuze tries to delineate sensation within the broader question of the relationship between art and reality, which keeps appearing as one of his main concerns until he gets to provide an answer in *What is Philosophy*? (1991). His conclusion may be worth looking at first, as it is foregrounded in his earlier works as well: "Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved" (167). If art holds a special place in Deleuze, it is probably relevant to this statement that art preserves and is preserved. A lot of questions arise, but first of all, what does art preserve? A few pages ahead, he bluntly answers:

> If art preserves it does not do so like industry, by adding a substance to make the thing last. The thing became independent of its "model" from the start, but it is also independent of other possible personae who are themselves artists-things, personae of painting breathing this air of painting. And it is no less independent of the viewer or hearer, who only experiences it after, if they have the strength for it. What about the creator? It is independent of the creator through the self-positing of the created, which is preserved in itself. What is preserved—the thing or the work of art—is a bloc of sensations. (163-64)

Here, he states very clearly that the aim of art is to extract a bloc of sensations, "a pure being of sensations" (167) independent of the creator or the viewer, who is a perceiving

subject before or after the work of art is created. For Deleuze, "the work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else"; "it exits itself," and it must "stand up on its own" (164).

Deleuze repeats his main idea that the very autonomy imposed upon art is most functional. Regarding painting, in particular, Deleuze attempts to explain the nature of this "bloc of sensations," and how it "acts" in *Francis Bacon*, in terms of its relation to force and figure, two of the most important concepts in his art theory. In short, force is a condition of the possibility of sensation, he explains, and the biggest challenge for good painters is not to reproduce or invent forms, but to capture the invisible forces that are not themselves visible. Impressionists well responded to this issue, Deleuze says, as shown in Millet's attempt to paint "weight common to the two objects not the offertory or the sack of potatoes," Cézanne's effort to render "the folding forces of mountains, the germinative force of a seed, the thermic force of a landscape," and Van Gogh's creation of unknown forces, "unheard-of forces of a sunflower seed" (49). But among those "force painters," the one whom Deleuze is most attracted to is obviously Francis Bacon, who tries not to paint the visible horrors of the world before which one screams, but the intensive forces that produce the scream. "It's a very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain" (qtd. in Sylvester 18). "I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror" (48) said Bacon in an interview with David Sylvester, declaring that he is cerebrally pessimistic, but nervously optimistic. That is, Deleuze finds in Bacon's paintings his strong aspiration for the "violence" of pure sensation.

Pure sensation is violent as it interrupts the already given clichés on a white canvas. Deleuze thinks that painters are already bombarded with all kinds of the figurative givens or "clichés" on the canvas before they even begin to work, so the real issue for good painters is to remove all the clichés for something totally new—"chaos" in Klee's word, or a "catastrophe," in Cezanne's word—to emerge on it. In *Cinema 1: Movement Image*, Deleuze defines clichés as anonymous and floating images "which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each of us and constitute our internal world, so that everyone possesses only psychic clichés by which we think and feel, are thought and felt, being ourselves one cliché among the others in the world that surrounds us" (208-209). To put it another way, it is exactly what hinders the production of something new, what frustrates the capture of the non-visible forces, something that obviously should be eliminated for art's great mission of "creation." And Deleuze goes on to identify the cliché's limitative and restrictive power as the very violence of the represented: "The former [the violence of pure sensation] is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which it passes, the domains it traverses: being itself a Figure, it must have nothing of the nature of a represented object" (*Bacon* 34-35).

Modern painters are said to have sympathized with this great mission of art, and to escape the clichés of figuration and narration and reach the direct sensation, according to Deleuze, they usually took two general routes: abstraction and abstract expressionism. But neither of these is satisfactory for Deleuze. In case of abstract painting like that of Mondrian or Kandinsky, instead of rejecting classical figuration, it relies too much on a

symbolic code by trying to draw abstract forms. On the other hand, at the opposite extreme of abstraction, abstract expressionism, like that of Pollock, it depends too much on chaos by dissolving all forms in a fluid and chaotic texture of manual lines and colors, and "this time the abyss or chaos is deployed to the maximum" (85).

Deleuze's admiration for Bacon derives from the fact that he is not involved in either of the two preceding paths. Bacon is not attracted to the abstract painting's way of liberating the form in an optical code; because it is abstract, the code can easily become a simple symbolic coding of the figurative which Bacon thinks is inevitably cerebral and thus cannot act upon the nervous system directly. On the other hand, he is not drawn to abstract expressionism's way of liberating matter in a manual chaos either. To be sure, sensation is achieved unlike the abstract painting this time, but it remains in an irrevocably confused state as the matter covers the whole painting without contour, making the sensation unable to be "clear" and "precise" (89). Bacon's middle path is, then, simply put, to make use of the "figures." The figure, which is different form "figuration" in that the latter refers to a form related to an object it is supposed to represent, could convey the violence of the sensation directly to our nervous system while making invisible forces visible, Bacon thought.

Deleuze categorizes the invisible forces that Bacon detects and captures through the deformed figures into three different kinds of sensations—the vibration, resonance, and the forced moment—and explains they correspond to Bacon's three distinctive uses of figures, respectively.[30] The first one, "vibration" characterizes the simple sensation that one finds in his paintings of an isolated figure. In those paintings, the figure itself is

[30] See Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 53, 60-61, and Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 168.

isolated by the round area, fighting against the figurative, illustrative and narrative, but through the medium of the same contour, it also has a correlation with the background. The second is the "resonance" in the paintings of a coupled figure. In this case, Bacon puts two bodies in a single painting which are rendered indiscernible, and lets the two figures confront each other, thus two sensations being made to embrace each other and resonate. The third one is what Deleuze calls, a "forced movement" which culminates in Bacon's triptychs, in which the figures are set apart in separated panels. With the triptych, the separated figures achieve "an extraordinary amplitude in a forced movement that gives it an autonomy" (61), and the limits of sensation are broken. Now, sensation is no longer dependent on a figure itself as it is at the first level of an isolated figure, but the intensive rhythm of force itself becomes the figure of the triptych according to its own separated directions. And this constitutes a reason Deleuze gives a privileged position to the triptychs among Bacon's works.

What attracts our attention here is the fact that, in Bacon's painting, what plays the role of the Figure is the human body, which, according to Deleuze, "functions as the material supports or framework that sustains a precise sensation" (xiii), without which the sensation would lack clarity and duration, and remain ephemeral. It is noteworthy that in clarifying this relation between sensation and the body of the figure, he illustrates the nature of sensation as being-in-the world in the phenomenologists' term.

> At one and the same time I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body that, being both subject and object,

> gives and receives the sensation. As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed. This was Cezanne's lesson against the impressionists: sensation is not in the "free" or "disembodied play of light and color (like the impressionists think); on the contrary, it is in the body, even the body of an apple. Color is in the body, sensation is in the body, and not in the air. Sensation is what is painted. What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation. (31-31)

The body or the body of the figure is the material support for sustaining and preserving sensation in Bacon's paintings, and this rhetoric oftentimes serves as a clue for affect theorists to argue how affect is integral to a body's perpetual becoming, constituting proof of a body's immersion or resistance in the world—according to them, it refuses as much as it invites.[31]

What is this body, then? And how does the body's immersion in the world itself constitutes resistance in the world? Deleuze argues that what he means by this "body" is always more than just the phenomenological body "which merely invokes the lived body" (*Bacon* 39). Instead, he is indicating "a more profound and almost unlivable Power," namely, the famous "body without organs," which Artaud discovered at the limit of the lived body beyond the organism ("The body is the body / it stands alone / it has no need of organs / the body is never an organism / organisms are the enemies of bodies"

[31] See, for example, Seigworth and Gregg, "The Inventory of Shimmers," 1.

[39]). As is well known by affect theorists and currently popular so-called posthumanists, the body without organs is said to be completely living, and yet not organic. Rather, it is an intense and intensive body, which doesn't have organs but thresholds or levels. Or it doesn't lack organs but it simply lacks the organism, the particular organization of organs, which is why Deleuze argues that it is defined not solely by the absence of organs, but by the existence of an indeterminate organ, or "the temporary and provisional presence of determinate organs" (42). Deleuze finds an exemplary figure in Bacon's painting—the body without organs which is nothing other than "flesh and nerve":

> Bacon and Artaud meet on many points: the Figure is the body without organs (dismantle the organism in favor of the body, the face in favor of the head); the body without organs is flesh and nerve; a wave flows through it and traces levels upon it; a sensation is produced when the wave encounters the Forces acting on the body, an "affective athleticism," a scream-breath. (40)[32]

This "curious Fleshism" reappears in *What Is Philosophy?* when he makes clear that it is the flesh that is "freed from the lived body, the perceived world and the intentionality of one toward the other," giving us "the being of sensation" (178). The flesh, or the figure is a sort of minimal material framework needed to support the sensational forces so that they don't dissolve into chaotic abstraction, to meaningless fragments, but on the other hand, it also needs to be as feeble as possible so that the forces do not become

[32] Deleuze says this is why Bacon's figures are usually deformed. For Deleuze, it is also important to understand that they are not tortured bodies, but "ordinary bodies in ordinary situations of discomfort"—"the most natural postures of a body that has been recognized by the simple force being exerted upon it" (50).

"territorialized," to use his term. When sensation is linked to the body in this way, Deleuze argues that it "ceases to be representative and becomes real," achieving the aim of art to "create the finite that restores the infinite" (*Bacon* 40; *What Is Philosophy?* 197). From this statement, it becomes clear that Deleuze's conception of the real revolves around his attempted harmonization of the finite with the potential of the infinite in his so-called transcendental materialism. His logic of pure sensation, in this sense, exemplifies one of the ways he tries to take immanence and transcendence at the same time and un-dialectically mediate them (if we can call it mediation)—as I will show further below—which he believes can be productive in thinking the emergence of new forms of individual and collective life, where the feeling of subjects, demoted to the bodies, or the mere flesh, constitutes itself an act of resistance; affect acts without being involved in an actual action.

## Deleuzian Lyrical Dialectics?

As is implied in his transcendental materialism, in his refusal to set up some kind of foundation outside immanence—hence his diction of "transcendental" not "transcendent"—and his desire to free from the restrictions of human experience by looking toward the future at the same time, Deleuze is a philosopher who believes in the power of "synthesis," which explains why so many kinds of dualism proliferate in his theory. Deleuzian "synthesis," however, does not operate in the same way as, for instance, the synthesis in Hegelian dialectics as is obvious from Deleuze's own rejection of Hegelian "mediation." Rather, in Deluze, repetition takes the place of "mediation," which, for Deleuze, is too abstract and logical. Influenced by Gabriel Tarde's idea that

"repetition is a more powerful and less tiring stylistic procedure than antithesis, and moreover better suited to renew a subject," Deleuze focused on the possibility of giving rise to "a dialectic quite different to that of Hegel" (*Difference and Repetition* 308 [note 15]). Joe Hughes, in his guidebook to Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* calls this kind of Deleuzian dialectic a "lyrical dialectic" borrowing Kierkegaard's words. Hughes argues that the main difference of Deleuzian movement in his anti-Hegelian lyrical dialectic is that it is "asymmetrical," and does not unfold by "negation" and "sublimation" (34). Deleuze's own statement of what constitutes a real movement as opposed to the Hegelian "false movement" can be helpful to look at:

> Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are among those who bring to philosophy a new means of expression. Furthermore, in all their work, *movement* is at issue. Their objection to Hegel is that he does not go beyond false movement—in other words, the abstract logical movement of "mediation." They want to put metaphysics in motion, in action. They want to make it act, and make it carry out immediate acts. It is not enough, therefore, for them to propose a new representation of movement; representation is already mediation. Rather, it is question of producing with the work a movement capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation; it is a question of making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations; of inventing vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind. (8, original emphasis)

In short, Deleuze's complaint about the movement of the Hegelian dialectic comes from his belief that Hegel "represents" becoming, rather than creating it; mediation is a false movement as long as it is mediate, incapable of producing pure immediacy.

In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze theorizes the genesis of the object, a "thing" composed of a quality and an extensity, and defines representation as the object considered from the point of view of its two distinctive traits: quality and extensity, an individual object of perception belonging to the realm of appearance. Appearing things in Deleuze are embedded in a system of determinable indeterminacy, which can be also called "potentialities," or "virtualities." Here, Deleuze's goal is, in a way, to bring us back to lower strata of consciousness, from consciousness of the object back to the Idea, and from the Idea to an evanescent materiality which is given to our sensibility. He makes clear that matter, idea, and representation—which he calls "primary order," "secondary organization," and "tertiary order" (239-49), respectively, in *The Logic of Sense*—are part of one and the same object, but he does not hide his regretful tone when dealing with the development of the three orders, as if the development meant the object's being gradually tainted in its worldly surroundings. And his ongoing argument that the lower strata persists in representation eventually operates as an urge to grasp matter, or movement, regardless of everything that it will later become—determinate bodies, qualities, and actions, always returning back to the pre-individual object of abstraction.

To create a new movement of representation is not enough since, in Deleuze, all representations are equated with already dead signs which lack potential to create

"newness," not just the new, but something radically new and original. Deleuze assumes representation to constitute a natural step of the movement of what he calls "active synthesis," which is directed toward the "real object," the object as a synthesis of quality and quantity. Also, he emphasizes that any representation can be true and legitimate as long as it remembers the conditions of its emergence and keeps participating in the virtual life from which it is derived—when representations are not tied to their origin, on the other hand, they become clichés and lose their ability to transform. Even his affirmation of "living representations," however, does not provide enough room for rethinking the possibility of representation per se—it is already a fixed and static entity as long as it remains representative—but rather, they are affirmed only to provide the represented with a capability to think back of its genesis, and to realize they are still governed by the virtual Idea. Representation can be meaningful only when it remembers its original purity at birth and when it keeps looking back with its impotence to create "newness" at its own level.

The fact that representation connects the self with the world is maintained in Deleuze, but he does not seem to fully answer the question of how something meaningful can be created at the level of representation by being connected to the "originary" truth of the Idea that the "derived" truth of representation relates to. As some Deleuzians like Joe Hughes even admit—although he is trying to defend the missing explanation—it is not clear in Deleuze, at least in his major works including *Difference and Repetition*, how the movement from the virtual to the actual unfolds without having the ideal qualities

transformed;[33] in other words, how does the Idea determine the movement of what Deleuze calls "actualization?"—which is a word taken directly from Hegel, by the way, however much Deleuze wishes to turn against it. This question is pivotal for one to be able to think about how the so-called virtual qualities of affect can meaningfully affect the actualized field of reality. The affect theorists' common response is that, since affects are not intended consciously, one cannot guarantee the influence of affect generated; it holds infinite autonomy in its impact as well; as affect does not have a goal, they just assume that it can yield "an actualized next or new that is somehow better than 'now'" due to its thoroughly immanent neutrality which "outplay[s] the paradigm of oppositions and negations by referring to "intense, strong, unprecedented states" that elude easy polarities and contradictions" (Gregg and Seigworth 10). That is, affect's progressive accumulations of intensities, its incessant proceeding without taking a position is asserted as its main source of power to interrupt the flow of the field of reality, imposing an unbiased force of changibility upon reality.

What is missing in this logic, however, is the explanation of how the potentiality of affect that is aroused will be kept and developed into an actual force for the better "now." Since there is no room for agency in affect theory—as soon as the concept of agency is involved, affect loses the radical source of its potentiality—they cannot answer the question as to how to congeal the momentary contingency of affect into non-volatile force, meaningful enough to be able to act upon reality for the change. The future temporality of affect, affect theorists argue, makes it possible for the immanence of the future to act upon the present in advance "in a state of the fusion of the ideal with the

[33] See Hughes, *Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*, 176.

actual" (Massumi 66). Without an explanation of the specific modes of co-existence of the virtual and the actual—in what ways can the disparate mode of the actual still be governed by the Idea of the virtual?—however, the theory remains incomplete, with itself being just another postmodern account of the emergence of a sublime moment.

The fact that affect theorists lack a valid explanation of "duration" can be thought of as, in a way, a natural consequence of their unjustifiable denunciation of consciousness as an agency of mere codification, causing the state of stasis to be fixed and representational; consciousness is always considered something to be "cancelled out" in their "asymmetrical" synthesis, rather than dialectically "negated"; if two terms are "asymmetrical" in the "lyric dialectic," the weight of the tension between the terms that each term should suffer cannot be equal either. This is why Jameson's designation of Deleuze as a new dialectical thinker cannot be considered valid.[34] What Jameson misses is the fact that in Deleuze's dualism, the tension between two terms works toward strengthening the validity of one term, which needs to be ultimately affirmed against another term. In this sense, Kevin Chua's review of Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* seems to be right that "Jameson mistakes the autonomy of affect for the autonomy of the Marxist dialectic."[35] Affect theory's rigid recognition of consciousness as a teleological agency does not leave any possibility for consciousness to be rethought as a meaningful faculty to reflect upon the relation between what has been already

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[34] See the chapter "Deleuze and Dualism" in his *Valences of the Dialectics* (London · New York: Verso, 2009).

[35] See Kevin Chua, "Jamesonian Affect, or the Lower Depths," review of *The Antinomies of Realism*, by Fredric Jameson, *Nonsite.org*, March 14, 2014, http://nonsite.org/the-tank/jamesons-the-antinomies-of-realism.

produced and what needs to be produced, in order to create more effective ways for the self to engage in the world. And this is where the positive virtual nature of affect becomes its own limit due to its paradoxical loss of power when proceeding to conscious emotion; it needs to keep remaining virtual, as a transcendental category "capable of bringing narrative into non-narrative, subjects into pure abstract form," borrowing Chua's words, without ever being actualized.

## Against the Ontologization of Politics

That affect cannot drive its potentiality toward the enduring power for actual changeability is not irrelevant to the fact that Deleuzian "becoming revolutionary" cannot seem to find a way to succeed in imagining revolution on a communal level. Deleuze's own analysis of Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, in particular, shows this difficulty well. As one who recognizes the essential connection between pure events and the forms of their linguistic expression, what attracts Deleuze in this story is the strange effects of the words "I would prefer not to" repeated by Bartleby, a pallid and forlorn scrivener newly employed by an elderly lawyer on Wall Street. Deleuze takes notice of the effect of "agrammaticality" of these words, pointing out that the anaphoric character of the final "to" that ends the phrase makes this formula lose all its reference and mean nothing any more, allowing it to be the potentiality of enunciation itself. Bartleby's formula, which is neither affirmative nor negative, and neither consent nor refusal, according to Deleuze, opens a zone of indiscernibility between yes and no, the preferable and the nonpreferable; it goes beyond the logic of

reason, being resistant to domestication by the already established order of the social system.

Not only is Bartleby's formula impossible to capture by the social codes of the so-called symbolic order, his language is also contagious, Deleuze emphasizes. The queer phrase "I would prefer" "burgeons and proliferates" (70) in the story, and flows into the language of the clerks and the attorney as well; it contaminates the language of people around Bartleby little by little and drives them crazy. The clerks who are angry with Bartleby who *prefers* not to do what he has to do, murmur with Bartleby's language when insisting that he should be driven out of the office. Also, the attorney, who played all his cards to remove Bartleby, ends up escaping himself from Bartleby by removing his office. As "a man without references," Bartleby severs all his language from its reference and frustrates the attorney's attempts to bring him back to the social order, remaining persistently a pure outsider behind the screen. Bartleby's words are truly affective, in the Deleuzian sense, interrupting the pre-established order of things to generate a revolutionary rupture.

Although Bartleby taps into revolutionary potential as the bearer of a minor and collective enunciation, Deleuze does not regard Bartleby's act as successful enough. Curiously, he even finishes his essay by describing Bartleby as something of a failure. That is, if we can say that Bartleby's revolution is just half done, or ended in failure in the lonely prison where he died, it is because he couldn't go one step further: he failed to find his brothers and sisters, his comrades. Deleuze implies in *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature* several times as well that the real bachelor machine is one that plugs itself into

a social field with multiple connections in a world, but without paternal function. He definitely recognizes the insufficiency of becoming revolutionary on an individual level as shown in his argument that Bartleby should "find the place where he can take his walks" beyond the private screen and constitute "a society of brothers" (85) where "alliance replaces filiation and the blood pact replaces consanguinity" (84). As often shown in the attitudes of modernists, however, Deleuze's fascination with Bartleby's sublime sacrifice is too romantic, and he does not even seem regretful about Bartleby's failure and death. He very much resembles Jameson, in this sense, who insists on an aesthetics of failure for his utopian project; death and failure as the heart of Being are the precondition for the imagination of utopia, and the experience of suffering and violence are elevated as if it were the only route to the "impossible" utopia in Jameson.

Paul Patton has named Deleuze's political project of constructing this kind of "community of celibates" (*Critical and Clinical* 84) as "immanent utopianism." Deleuze makes sure, however, that revolution as utopia of immanence does not mean that it is just a dream, something that is not realized or that is only realized by betraying itself. Nor does he posit a well-established blueprint for an ideal future. Rather, he argues it is to see revolution as "infinite movement and absolute survey, but to the extent that these figures connect up with what is real here and now" (*What Is Philosophy?* 100) in the struggle against the present. Obviously, this means that the possibilities of revolution should be imagined in terms of the virtual, rather than the actual, so that they can encompass the conditions under which absolute deterritorialization is manifest in positive form. In the Deleuzian community of celibates, Deleuze dreams that the bachelor machine draws its

members into an unlimited becoming, where "a burning passion deeper than love traces a zone of indiscernibility in which it passes through all intensities in every direction" (*Critical and Clinical* 84). In fact, Deleuze bases this kind of understanding of revolution as the pure event on Kant, in particular, on his remark in *The Contest of Faculties* that "the concept of revolution exists not in the way in which revolution is under taken in a necessarily relative social field but in the 'enthusiasm' with which it is thought on an absolute plane of immanence, like a presentation of the infinite in the here and now, which includes nothing rational or even reasonable" (*What Is Philosophy?* 100). From this statement, Deleuze draws the necessity to distinguish "the way revolutions turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming," and asserts that "men's only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is intolerable" (*Negotiations* 171). Even, in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze goes on to point out that revolution is itself a philosophical concept par excellence in so far as the concept is "the contour, the configuration or constellation of an event to come" (32-33). But again, Deleuze's political project cannot explain the question as to "how." The inevitable correlation between the virtual and the actual—how a synthetic subject becomes active through the power of the virtual whose ideas guide the passive synthesis transforming them into properly active syntheses—is just not enough to explain how agents are possible in this theory. In Deleuze, individuation occurs as a pre-personal process, and beings are just effects of an aleatory event that drives the process. Deleuze seems to maintain a certain illusion of subjectivity in his political project, but his theory

provides no real account of how even the minimum degree of self-directedness, which is required for any explanation of political agency, can be possible.[36]

Todd Cronan's crucial point on the impossibility of human agency in affect theory resonates with my argument above as well: "No matter how the self is described, humanist or posthumanist, singular or multiple, integral or institutional, centered or decentered, whole or fragmented, the problem of agency remains. Even if the idea of the self is a fiction, we are still called upon to act and make choices. To say that the self is constructed does not say anything about what that self is supposed to do" (Cronan 16). In the theories of affect and Deleuze that affect theorists always return to as a point of reference, an act of an individual cannot be explained without relying on a sort of aleatory determination by a pre-personal field. Affect theorists are seized with the poststructural anxiety about what Deleuze calls the "paternal function" (*Critical and Clinical* 76) of consciousness, and their fear of its despotic power made them choose to give up the category of consciousness completely rather than rethinking its limitations and possibilities—why should the functions of consciousness, representation, and agency always be explained in terms of rigid codification, despotic power, and authoritative unity?

Affect theorists' insistence on the political dimension of affect is based on the versatility of affect, in particular. They argue that the neutrality of affect can be more

[36] One might argue that Hardt and Negri's politics of "the multitude" can possibly show one way of appropriating Deleuze's ontology in imagining a new form of political subject. It can be answered well, though, by pointing out Christian Thorne's argument that the multitude "does not fight," but just "flees": "the multitude remains the agent of history, to be sure, but only in its capacity for flight." Thorn provides an intriguing interpretation of how Hardt and Negri's imagined communist society resummons forms of feudalism as well. For a detailed explanation about how Hardt and Negri's theory of the multitude as a "politics of escape" cannot constitute itself as an effective political theory, see Christian Thorne's "Against Joy; or, Deleuze's Empire" on his blog, *Christian Thorne · Commonplace Book*.

"sensitive to the 'manner' of a world," constituting it as a sort of "ethico-aesthetics," "without collapsing back to humanism" (Gregg and Seigworth 15). Facing the so-called crisis of humanism, their solution is to drop "the human" completely and flee to the purified impersonal realm outside this secular world while arguing at the same time that there is no outside and everything is immanent. Furthermore, there is a certain kind of romanticism working in this logic, in their fear of reason, mind and language, as Follet argues, that "they will dissect/murder, reduce or reify," and in their perspective that "seeks a return to nature in the form of namelessness, pure existence, and the 'perpetual present.'"

Ultimately, the current fascination with the idea of affect is a symptom of how the ontologization of politics has become a new academic trend in the humanities and social sciences. Most of all, the autonomy of affect speaks to the role of art after Barthes's "death of the author" as it affirms art as non-representational and interpretation-independent. Restricting the concepts of representation and meaning to monolithic entities as opposed to "lived experience," a deadening form of expression, however, leads to a certain myopia with respect to how forms of representation can suggest possible and meaningful ways to mediate our connection with the world. As long as we live in a world where we communicate using signs, how to make those signs meaningful and reanimated can be a more responsible option than the paradoxically obscene pursuit of a path of the divine purification and immediacy of language, which carries a certain kind of arrogance toward our reality. The task of imagining a new realism after modernism can begin only after our re-appropriation of representation as an affirmative procedure to make one

closer to the world again. It is a call for us to encounter our passion to change, and fight with it rather than “flee.”

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